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Chavez accused of launching a populist coup in Venezuela

Harry der Nederlanden

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is moving far beyond his programs to alleviate poverty in his country to centralize even more power in his person. Capitalizing on his popularity with the poor, he is seeking far-reaching changes to the Venezuelan constitution that will enable him to stay in power indefinitely. They will also create a hierarchy of Chavista loyalists and appointees to displace the authority of elected officials on the state and city levels. The total reform package encompasses no less than 69 reforms cooked up by a parliament pretty well cleansed of all opposition.

The package of so-called reforms, charged one former Chavez general, would amount to a coup. The concentration of power in one man or in the military has evoked international outcry in Pakistan and Myanmar, but Chavez' blatant grab for power has drawn very little outrage in the Western media. In fact, several Hollywood stars have made the trip to Venezuela to do homage to Chavez, and, of course, to thumb their noses at President Bush.

Like so many radical reformers convinced of the righteousness of their cause, Chavez is impatient at the slow pace of change possible under democracy and seeks to streamline reform by virtually arrogating to himself the power to rule by decree.

He has prepared the ground for his aggrandisement of power by creating several new institutions that make the poor indebted directly to him and his party. Rather than strengthening existing democratic institutions and civil society, he has been attempting to get everything under his control. This has been the tactic of every dictator from Hitler and Stalin to Saddam Hussein. Chavistas now not only control the national Assembly but also the Supreme Court, the entire federal bureaucracy and the nationalized companies – the oil and electrical industries, and the telephone company. Chavez opponents claim they have been blacklisted and barred from jobs in those sectors.

Chavez has been able to achieve all this because of the huge oil revenues which he has been spending on numerous social programs. Critics, however, lament that many of them do not have a great deal of substance and that they have not improved the lives of the poor very much. Moreover, they are impossible to sustain in the long term.

Nevertheless, impatient with the rate at which his "Bolivarian Revolution" is being implemented Chavez pushes on. The amendments he proposes would abolish the term limits for the presidency, but not for any other elected offices. The voting age would be lowered from 18 to 16 and the work day cut to six hours. Homemakers would get state pensions. Other amendments would enable Chavez to create new administrative regions run by Chavez appointees. These "communal councils" would receive federal funding, bypassing elected state and city officials, many of whom have not climbed aboard the Chavista bandwagon. The government bureaucracy has ballooned under Chavez, as he has put more and more people on the government payroll. And his new initiatives would add even more. Margarita Lopez Maya, a professor at the University of Central Venezuela, said, "These reforms profoundly contradict the principles of participatory democracy embedded in the late constitution of 1999. It's a constitution not for everyone but for Chavez."

None of this, it seems, has decreased his popularity very much. There has always been strong opposition to him among the middle and upper classes, but they are vastly outnumbered by the poor. The closing of an anti-Chavez televison station and threats made against the free press have provoked students to protest. One of the reforms would permit Chavez to declare states of emergency during which he may censor the media. A recent student

See **Chavez** *on page 2*

Iraq's Mandaean Christians "desperate for help"

Elizabeth Kendal

The Quran groups together "Believers, Jews, Christians and Sabians" (or Sabaeans, also known as Mandaeans) as those who believe in God and the Last Day and do what is right (Sura 2: 62 and 5:69). Despite that, Shi'ite clerics in Iraq have issued fatwas against the Mandaeans, deeming they are not "People of the Book" and therefore not considered worthy of "protection": right to life in exchange for subjugation and payment (Sura 9:29).

As followers of John the Baptist, Mandaeans traditionally live close to rivers where they regularly participate in ceremonial baptismal cleansing. They speak a dialect of Eastern Aramaic and traditionally work as fine craftsmen, primarily jewellers. They are pacifists and their Mandaean faith prohibits the bearing of arms. As totally unprotected non-Muslims, Iraq's Sabian Mandaeans are amongst the most endangered and vulnerable people in Iraq. The situation for thousands of Mandaean refugees and asylum seekers in Jordan and Syria is not much better.

On November 14, SBS radio in Australia broadcast a documentary by Czech investigative reporter Ika de Detrich entitled "Mandaeans – the last Gnostic community at the brink of extinction?" (The 32-minute audio can be accessed at http://www.radio.sbs.com.au/language.php?happening=5595&language=Czech).

Mandaeans – at the brink of extinction?

Ika de Detrich's radio documentary addresses both the suffering of the Mandaean remnant in Iraq who are just hoping against all odds to get out of the country alive and the suffering of the thousands of Mandaean refugees and asylum seekers who are struggling with trauma and terrible hardship in Syria and Jordan.

De Detrich speaks with John Clugston, the legal advisor for the Sabian Mandaean Association of Australia (SMAA). Clugston is certain that Muslim fundamentalists are waging a systematic campaign to eradicate the Mandaean community and its culture through killings, rapes, forced conversions and terrorism.

Importantly, Clugston observes that while other groups are also suffering – notably the Christians – the suffering of the Mandaeans is particularly acute because they are such a small and localised

See **Mandaeans** *on page 2*

News

Chavez . . . *continued from page 1*

protest was violently repressed and some students were killed, again without drawing much attention from the Western media.

While Chavez has been grandstanding abroad and trying to drum up support for his crusade against the American Empire, street crime in his country has been escalating at an alarming rate. And the drain of investment dollars from Venezuela caused by his policies has depressed the value of the country's currency, creating an annual inflation rate of 16 percent.

Although only about one-third of Venezuelans support Chavez' constitutional "coup d'etat", many will not turn out to vote. They are either convinced that the polls will not be fair or that voting against Chavez will get them blacklisted.

When long-time supporter, retired defense minister General Raul Baduel, called the constitutional revision a coup, Chavez responded by calling him a traitor and pledging that Badual would end before a firing squad. One of the members of the National Assembly who protested against branding Badual as a traitor was promptly expelled from the party. Chavez has taken as his slogan: "Fatherland, socialism or death."

According to a recent poll (perhaps taken mostly among the middle class), one in three Venezuelans would consider leaving the country if they could. Many of those with the resources are leaving the country to settle in nearby Panama. They say they are fleeing economic instability and a skyrocketing crime rate. Applications for non-immigrant visas from Venezuela to Canada are expected to number 10,000 this year, up some 3,000 over last year.

Francis Fukuyama, Director of the International Development Program at Johns Hopkins University, speaks of a widespread pessimism in Latin America (and elsewhere) about democracy as the path to a better life. In the 80s Latin American countries were persuaded by Washington to open their economies to global trade and reduce the role of the state in controling their economies. While this strategy created growth in East Asia, all across Latin America it caused stagnation, and a crisis in Argentina. This resulted in disillusion with "neoliberalism" and a revival of leftist sentiment. Writes Fukuyama: "At the moment, the dominant discourse in the Western Hemisphere holds that US ideas about development have failed." But, he maintains, "most Latin American countries have been successfully deepening their democratic institutions, integrating into the global economy, and beginning to address the endemic social inequalities that bode well for the future."

Chavez' Bolivarian Revolution may satisfy short term populist demands, "but in ways that are unsustainable in the long run." Anti-US rhetoric obscures the fact that those countries that followed gradual reform have seen growth with low inflation, says Fukuyama.

He does point out, however, that the focus on economic growth of the 80s as a way to lift all ships did not work. However, Mexico and Brazil have succeeded in introducing innovative social programs that directly address the problems of inequality and poverty and have achieved drastic reductions in the poverty rate. They are programs that have not produces drastic changes overnight and have not drawn much attention from the Western press, but, argues Fukuyama, they have much better prospects of improving the condition of the poor over the long haul than Chavez' Bolivarian Revolution.

Mandaeans *cont. from p.1*

community. The Mandaeans do not have co-religionists in Turkey, Syria or Jordan to assist them, shelter them or care for them in their distress. Furthermore, unlike some other ethnic-religious diasporas, the Mandaean Diaspora in the West is truly miniscule and without funds or political influence.

Ika de Detrich explains that in Iraq the Mandaean remnant has no rights because the law is based on Islamic Sharia. They have no Mandaean schools and no Mandaean publications. Mandaean children are forced to attend Islamic schools, where they face aggression and constant pressure to convert to Islam. They are always at risk.

De Detrich reports that in 2003, before the US-led invasion, there were around 60,000 Mandaeans in Iraq living between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Attacks on the community commenced as soon as the regime was toppled. Large numbers of Mandaeans have been killed while thousands have fled for their lives. Today only 5,000 remain. Some 2,000 Mandaeans are refugees or asylum seekers in Jordan while some 10,000 are in Syria. They are a small, vulnerable and relatively voiceless minority amongst 4.2 million displaced Iraqis.

The radio documentary contains a moving testimony from SMAA founder, Alla Khamas, who migrated to Australia in 1981. Khamas recently made a visit to Jordan to assist relatives who had fled Iraq. He laments that conditions in Jordan were far worse than he ever could have imagined. He says he could not hold back his tears when he saw the suffering and hardship of Mandaean refugees and asylum seekers forced to live with no money, little food, limited electricity, poor sanitation and deteriorating health.

As Ika de Detrich notes, Jordan closed its borders two years ago due to the difficulties it was having coping with the influx of refugees. Then on October 15, 2007 Syria closed its borders. (Note: This will be disastrous for Iraq's Christian and Mandaean remnants if conflict erupts in northern Iraq over the status of Kirkuk.)

De Ditrich talked by phone to Taniana Onano, an Australian immigration agent visiting clients in Damascus. Onano describes the suffering of Mandaean refugees in Syria as "heartbreaking" and "unbelievable". She says that because the refugees do not have the right to work, they have no money for rent or for school or for anything. Some refugees work illegally for cash, out of desperation, but they are exploited: underpaid for their work and overcharged for rents. Onano says they are all terrified of being arrested or deported and they are all terribly depressed. She believes the suffering is much worse than she is able to observe. Onano explains that, while Syrian authorities give some assistance to those formally recognised as refugees, those with only Temporary Protection status get no assistance at all. (Note: Syria's "open door" policy was in the name of pan-Arabism, so Assyrians and Sabian Mandaeans might not be as welcome as Arabs.)

Further to this Ika de Ditrich reports that Temporary Protection status is no longer given. Iraqi refugees in Syria are now given an "appointment card". This means that until refugee status is approved the Iraqi refugees have no legal protection or status in Syria and are forced to wait an anxious six months or more before they can even talk to a UNHCR official. Furthermore, there is great concern that the Iraqis will be deported as soon as their visas expire.

As Ika de Detrich reports, fatwas issued against Mandaeans are valid everywhere, not just in Iraq. Mandaean priests are especially at risk because they are seen as the bearers of Mandaean religion and culture and their distinctive appearance makes them easily recognisable. De Ditrich reports that many Mandaean priests have become hunted fugitives, forced to stay on the move.

Doubtless Ika de Ditrich is right when she asserts that the Mandaeans are unlikely to be ever able to return to Iraq safely, even after "stabilisation". Their fate and future is in the hands of other countries prepared to take them.

"Who will take them?" She asks. "According to the 1949 Geneva Convention and 1977 additional protocols, governments waging an armed intervention in another country have a duty to the affected civilian populations."

De Detrich reports that in four years the USA has only accepted some 500 Iraqi refugees including a handful of Mandaeans. However, American policy has been changing and De Detrich's figures are not up to date. America is finally opening its doors, albeit slowly.

According to de Detrich, no Mandaeans have ever been accepted into the UK.

The SMAA reports that since January this year, 7 Mandaean families have been accepted into Australia while 184 applications have been refused. Refugees applying from Syria and Jordan have no right of appeal after rejection. According to de Detrich, in August 2007 the Australian government, under pressure from the UNHCR, agreed to take in 13,000 Iraqi refugees, 35 percent of them Christians and Mandaeans. However, Mandaean applications continue to fall on deaf ears.

World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty News & Analysis From: WEA RLC Principal Researcher and Writer, Elizabeth Kendal

"The Baptism of Jesus" by Gustave Doré

News

Namibia: Land reform reproducing poverty

Farm in Namibia

JOHANNESBURG (IRIN) – Namibia's land reform program is a "zero sum game" that merely swaps one form of poverty for another in its current resettlement program, according to an independent report on attempts to find a equitable solution to racially skewed land ownership.

The Legal Assistance Centre (LAC), a non-governmental human rights organisation based in the capital, Windhoek, said in a report reviewing the achievements so far of Namibia's land reform program, No Resettlement Available, that "most [resettlement farms] are not doing very well; in fact, it is not apparent that any are."

The size of the farms allocated and the agricultural methods practiced were among the problems identified. "Black farmers get smaller units than white farmers held, but remain stuck with the same plan to be livestock farmers," said the report.

"Since even the larger white farms were not very profitable, this apportionment is both setting black farmers up to fail, and failing to reconceptualise a new Namibian agricultural order that could both feed the growing population and provide reasonable incomes to the new black commercial farmers."

Namibia, which won its independence from apartheid South Africa in 1990, inherited a colonial division of land in which about half the agricultural land is owned by 3,500 white farmers. Farms average about 5,000 hectares in the north of the country and 10,000 hectares in the south, while nearly 1 million black Namibians live on "heavily overgrazed" communal lands.

The large commercial farm of the apartheid era, an old and inefficient structure of agriculture, is being reproduced in a diluted form. The report by Willem Odendaal, of the LAC's Land Environment and Development Project, and Sidney Harring, Professor of Law at the City University in New York, said the government's agrarian policy had failed to adapt to the demands of a modern Namibia or benefit African farmers.

"Dividing large farms into units of one-fifth to one-seventh the size [of the original farm] – the typical resettlement farm size – not only applies the failed colonial model [of cattle farming], but further weakens it, in that farms of such small sizes cannot succeed. The large commercial farm of the apartheid era, an old and inefficient structure of agriculture, is being reproduced in a diluted form."

Namibia is an arid country of about 825,400sq km, of which only about 100sq km are suitable for dry [non-irrigated] crop cultivation; it suffers drought in six out of every 10 years and its growing population of about 2 million people has seen "several hundred thousand blacks ... crowded off ... communal lands and move to sprawling squatter camps surrounding every town in Namibia," the LRC report said.

Slow pace of land reform

The Namibian government, like those of neighbouring South Africa and Zimbabwe, has made land reform a central policy tenet, and "government's resettlement scheme has placed 800 farms in black hands in the 17 years since independence," the report noted.

"This is about 12 percent of all farms, or less or than one percent a year, so the process will take over 100 years to complete, depending on what proportion of white commercial farms the government plans to place in blacks hands before deeming the process complete."

Sakkie Coetzee, executive manager of the Namibian Agricultural Union, which draws it membership from mainly white commercial farmers, told IRIN that according to their records, "more than 1,000 farms" or about 16 percent of commercial farmland, had been transferred to previously disadvantaged people.

He said the agricultural capacity of the country was "overstated" and the "perception of large [farms] is not necessarily the right perception" owing to the

See **Namibia** *on page 19*

Christian Heritage Party investigated for writings about homosexuality

Canada's Christian Heritage Party and its leader, Ron Gray, are being taken to the Canadian Human Rights Commission over commentary and opinion related to how the government and society should treat homosexuality. And Gray says he's been told directly by an employee of the Human Rights Commission that the Canadian Human Rights Act is "about censorship".

The complaint centres in part on re-posting of five-year old WorldNetDaily.com news article.

An Edmonton man, Rob Wells, has filed three complaints against Gray and his party. Two of them relate to the reposting of an item first published on WorldNetDaily.com back in April of 2002; an article written by Jon Dougherty entitled "Report: Pedophilia more common among 'gays' – Research purports to reveal 'dark side' of homosexual culture". The third complaint is against Ron Gray personally for several commentaries he wrote and distributed to party members. One of those commentaries, entitled "Sitcom prophet", likened the current climate of debate about homosexuality in Canada to the "Cone of Silence" in the 1960's-era television situation comedy "Get Smart", where the two leading characters would isolate themselves in a room where no-one could hear them, but they couldn't hear one another either. Gray wrote in the commentary that: "The problem with Canada's 'Cone of Silence' over the issue of homosexuality is that, like the security device in 'Get Smart', the inevitable result is that no one can communicate anything – and even the truth gets silenced."

In an exclusive interview with noapologies.ca, Ron Gray says the complaints filed against him and his party allege they are "motivated by hate, and defaming homosexual persons."

Ron Gray: "Commission employee told me: 'Canadian Human Rights Act is about censorship.'"

And, he says, when he had a conversation with a Commission employee, mediator Bob Fagan, about the specifics of the allegation, he was astonished at what he heard. "I told him that it seemed to be an abuse of the Human Rights Act for someone to try and use it as an instrument of censorship. And when I said that, on the phone, there was a pause and then he said, in a somewhat astonished tone: 'But the Human Rights Act is about censorship'. Then it was my turn to be silent on my end, because I found that breath-taking. For the Human Rights Commission's own mediator to acknowledge that censorship was the purpose of their Act."

Gray: "Charge me under the Criminal Code; I'm perfectly willing to risk going to jail."

And Gray says as fas as the "hate motivation" is concerned, nothing could be further from the truth. "I would contend", he says, "that Christians are the best friends homosexuals have because we want to see them delivered from an addiction that will shorten their lives." Gray also says he'd be much happier fighting this battle in a regular court rather than before the Canadian Human Rights Commission, where the usual rules of evidence don't apply. "If (Mr. Wells) truly believes I am motivated by hate, his complaint should not be before the Human Rights Commission. He should charge me under Section 319 of the Criminal Code (of Canada). That carries with is the possiblity of two years in jail, but in defence of the (free speech) rights of Canadians I am perfectly willing to risk going to jail."

For more information contact the ECP Centre at: Email: info@ecpcentre.org Website: www.noapologies.ca

Equipping Christians for the Public-square Centre is a Christian advocacy organization that believes that social conservative Christians need a national voice defending their right to exist, participate in and express themselves in the public square.

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Editorial

Kicking Autumn leaves

Harry der Nederlanden

The leaves are swirling amidst a dusting of snow today. Till a week ago, the maples on our street clung tenaciously to their bright colors to extend the season – yellow, gold, copper, crimson, deep maroon, faded greens and darkening greens. One of the joys of Autumn is to stroll down the sides of the street kicking up this palette of mixed colors to see them flash in the sun and leap in the wind. The last glories of the bygone summer.

Some folks are far too eager to tidy up their yards, hurrying out to rake up the leaves and bag them, and they spoil the experience a bit. You need huge profligate drifts of leaves to really make them fly and celebrate the season.

Now that we had a couple of nights of real frost, the maples suddenly dropped their remaining leaves en masse, so that they fell in well-defined circles around each tree like a shed gown. This tree trunk was surrounded by a dappled circle of yellow and light green leaves, and the one next to it by orange and yellow leaves, and one farther down by dark green, maroon and purplish leaves, all in interlocking circles. But then the wind came up and stirred them all together.

In past years we drove around the neighborhood looking for bags of leaves that had been mulched and mixed with grass clippings and loaded them into our van. Then we piled them high in our garden and mixed in the entire summer's production of our compost bins. In the Spring that mix was spaded into the ground.

When we moved into our house in the late 70s, the garden was a low spot in our yard that formed a small lake every time it rained. The soil was thick with clay and hard to work. Now the garden is at least two feet higher and the soil is loose and porous. Rose loves to dig in it and marvel at all the worms that have come calling. I wait with my marveling until the flowers and veggies pop up in the Spring.

Fall is a season for dying. Our gardens die back; the leaves fall and begin to decay, the sap that gives life to trees withdraws deep into their roots to await the warmth of spring, seeds bury themselves in the earth and play dead till they're called upon to perform their miracle of rejuvenation.

That's how it is in our world, as in nature, dying and living are closely intermingled. Without this seasonal dying and decay, there would be no new life in the Spring. The soil would become hard and impervious, smothering the seeds beneath and repelling the rain.

In human life, too, dying and living are all mixed together. Only if we live with a deep awareness of the presence of death do we truly live, and only if we are fully open to life do we begin to sense the meaning and mystery of death. Death is frequently associated with darkness in Scripture, but at the same time Scripture also kicks up brilliant leaves out of that darkness, for it is through death – the death of the Son of Man – that new light and new life enter the world. It is through dying, the Word of God tells us, that we're born to eternal life.

Reflection on the seasons and the natural cycles of life and death has been one of the ways we humans have sought to make peace with death and dying. Many find comfort in the thought that our lives are part of these natural cycles. Like the leaves and grasses and flowers, we return to the earth from which we have come. And in the process we become the basis for new life. But there's a limit to how much comfort one can draw from being turned into fertilizer, it seems to me.

In his poem *Thanatopsis*, William Cullen Bryant hears the voice of nature speak to him in the bitter hour of death when he is to be laid in the cold ground to have his human image erased.

Earth that has nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share and treads upon; the oak
Shall send his roots abroad and pierce thy mold.

This thought doesn't quite satisfy the poet. He goes on to rejoice in the fact that in so being reclaimed by the earth, his atoms will mingle with those of kings, the powerful and the wise of this earth. Cold comfort. From this perspective, not only is all that pomp and power and pride of knowledge dissolved into the earth with those who once achieved it, there is also very little prospect of enjoying conversation with them when you're nothing but a clod or a leaf.

It is astonishing that when confronted by death wise men and poets resort to the comfort of seeing themselves as nothing but things – leaves, clods, dust. But when they are in the midst of life, everything hinges on being a unique individual, a person who matters to others as this particular person and not just anyone. We are not, if we live our lives as human beings, merely masses of indistinguishable leaves swept along to the grave by the Autumn wind.

This is why death brings such grief, such an intense sense of loss. It seems to annihilate what we have experienced as the most precious thing in this world – love for one another. In a profound sense, then, that grief experienced by everyone is a confirmation of the irreduceability of our personhood. It is part of what God has created to endure. He created persons, unique individuals, in his image, as persons who can respond to him and persons who seek his face. He is not just concerned for the world as a whole and for his Kingdom. He calls us by name and gives each of us a unique calling. His relationship to us is one of person to person.

In the post World War II years, the existentialists talked much of death. They stressed that life is finite, and most went on to deepen that thought by insisting that there is nothing beyond this temporal life to give it transcendent meaning. Only by confronting this fact of our being-toward-death, they emphasized, will we live life with the intensity and authenticity of full human beings.

At the same time, however, they struggled to explain how life could have meaning and purpose if the universe is indifferent to human desires, goals, ideals. Increasingly their poetry, art and philosophy focused on depicting the meaninglessness and emptiness of this life. The prevailing mood became one of despair, even of contempt for ones fellow men who allowed themselves to be reduced to mass men, automatons who mindlessly followed middle class conventions.

So instead of celebrating the goodness of this finite, created existence that we have been given, they tended to cultivate a gnostic contempt for it. Like the gnostics, they began to see this world as a vale of tears to be suffered, something to be left behind. Reflecting on the reality of death did little to fill their lives with meaning and joy and vitality. It only brought disillusion.

Yet, the Bible urges us to reflect on the leaves and the grasses as reminders that our lives are brief and that we too will die. In fact, the Bible greatly expands the meaning and the impact of death. It is not just that final moment when each of us personally meets our end. Death stalks us everywhere, not just as the grim reaper, but as that which alienates us from God and leaves us floundering, lost in the dark. Death, in this all-encompassing sense, came into the world by sin. It is mingled with the judgment of God on sin.

But it is precisely this judgment, this demand by God for what is right and true and good for us that also brings deliverance. We are reminded to think on death not to scarify us into heaven, but because only by thinking on death can we be illuminated by the knowledge of the death and resurrection of him who is the victor over death.

So as we kick up the leaves that are being blown to decay to remind us of our mortality, their bright colors also remind us of the resurrection and of glories yet to come. They remind us that God does not look on us as so many leaves to be blown to corruption, but that he sent his Son here to walk with us through this valley strewn with leaves. He walks with us as persons whom he has chosen to reflect his face, and he values that personhood so much that he himself suffered the judgment that is contained in death. By doing so, he removed from death its greatest terror, namely, that it can erase us from before the face of God and annihilate the love that makes us what we are – God's children.

It seems incredible, but one day we will kick up leaves in the new heaven and the new earth and we will sing:

Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?

For already here, in the present, in Christ we are already touched by immortality.

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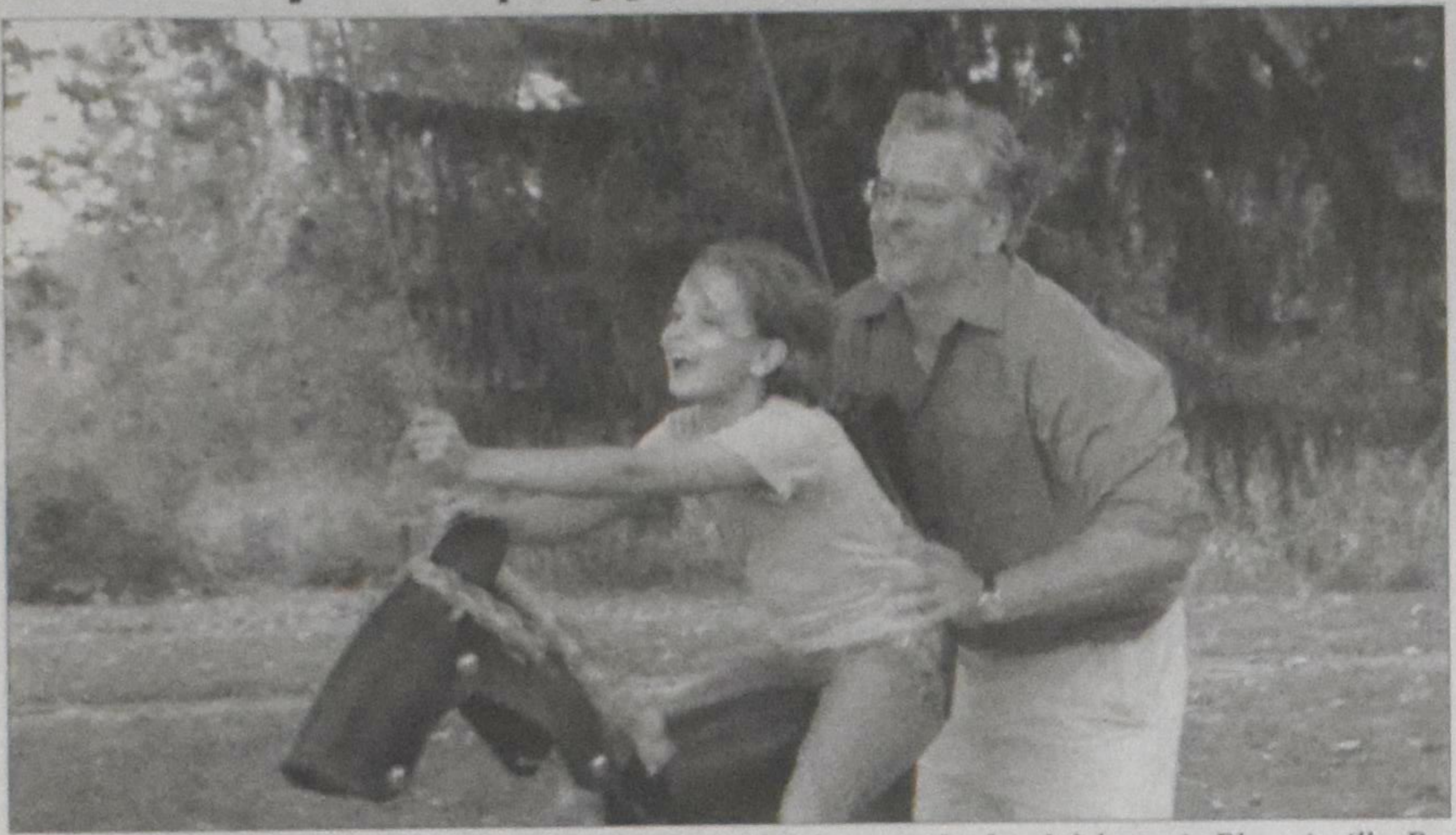
Resources

For cancer patients, support is just a phone call away



Cancer survivor Robert Gunther plays with daughter Larkspur at the family's home in Phoenixville, Pa. Since his diagnosis last year, Gunther receives help from a weekly teleconference support group hosted by the Cancer Recovery Foundation of America in Harrisburg, Pa. A UMNS photo by John Gordon.

John Gordon

HARRISBURG, Penn. (UMNS) – As the Rev. Michael Gingerich listens on a speaker-phone, calls come in from Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Nebraska and Canada.

The callers have something in common. They're all battling cancer and seeking friendly voices that offer support and encouragement.

"I think it's essential to be able to have the support of people who understand and have been on a very similar journey," said Gingerich, director of program services for the Cancer Recovery Foundation of America.

"And even though every cancer experience is different, there are a lot of similarities, a lot of feelings that everyone goes through."

Gingerich moderates a weekly conference call to provide a telephone support group for cancer survivors. Topics during the hour-long call range from fear to gratitude.

"For many people, fear is perhaps the first reaction that they have. And for a lot of them, it's very overwhelming," said Gingerich.

"Gratitude is one of the things we talk about on our calls almost on a weekly basis – how important it is to seek what is right, what is good, what is going well in life, and to celebrate that."

Support options

Gingerich says the conference call is ideal for people unable to attend a face-to-face support group meeting because of their illness or location. Some members call from bed or from a clinic while receiving chemotherapy.

"What we do here at the Cancer Recovery Foundation is try to let people know that there are options, that it's not hopeless," he said.

Twenty years of experience as a United Methodist pastor helped prepare Gingerich for the task. The disease touched his family three years ago when his wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. "That has helped tremendously to understand what it's like to be a family member and a caregiver of someone who's going through cancer and to know what the difficulties and the fears and the worries are when you hear that diagnosis," he said.

Gingerich also hosts a weekly telephone support session for caregivers.

The Cancer Recovery Foundation was begun by author Greg Anderson, who was diagnosed in 1984 with lung cancer and given 30 days to live. Anderson survived and shaped the foundation's tenets that – besides medical care – faith, attitude, support, nutrition and exercise are all important elements in surviving cancer.

Sharing the journey

During a recent call to the support group, Robert Gunther noted it was the first anniversary of his cancer diagnosis. A freelance writer from Phoenixville, Pa., Gunther underwent surgery and chemotherapy for colon cancer.

Gunther credits his long-distance friends with giving him the encouragement he's needed. "It's helped me in a couple of ways," he said. "There's sort of the broad help in feeling like you're not alone in this whole thing, and that there's other people who are struggling with some of the same issues."

When Gunther learned he had cancer, his first thoughts turned to his family – his wife, Cynthia, and their three children, Anders, 22, Pelle, 16, and Larkspur, 10.

"I wanted to be able to see my daughter, who's 10, get married," said Gunther. "It's sort of a cliché because that's the thing that you think that you would think of. But it's actually true." With chemotherapy treatments completed, Gunther feels stronger today. Though he lacked the strength for a planned 140-mile hike, he has managed to go whitewater kayaking. He also exercises regularly and now eats healthier foods.

Gunther calls cancer a "brutal, relentless and totally unpredictable" disease, but he's learned it is not a death sentence.

"I've had more conversations with people about gratitude, forgiveness and things that you would think that you would talk about when things were going really well ...," he said. "It changes the way you look at the world, and there's a real opportunity there."

Gordon is a freelance writer and producer in Marshall, Texas.

For more information about telephone support groups, contact the Cancer Recovery Foundation of America at (800) 238-6479. (http://www.cancerrecovery.org/site/PageServer?pagename=TeleSupportGroups)

Canadian Christian Authors

To promote Canadian Christian authors, much less known in Canada than their American counterparts, Mitchell Family Books have scheduled Author Day at their various locations on December 12, 2007

St. Catharines ON Mitchell Family Bookstore December 12 from 1p.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Turn Your Dreams into Realities by Sue Augustine

Packed with 101 creative ideas and hands-on strategies, this bestselling guide shows you how to identify and release your God-given passions and dreams to go beyond what you've ever thought possible.

Reverend Mother's Daughter by Mary Haskett

An unwanted baby of African/English parentage is taken by Reverend Mother into her home for the aged in England. An extraordinary story with a victorious ending.

Kitchener ON Mitchell Family Bookstore December 12 from 1p.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Reflections from the Waiting Room: Insights for thriving when Life puts you on by Hold Keturah Leonforde

• Feeling stuck between jobs? • Relationships? • Assignments? • Pay cheques? • A rock and a hard place? Welcome to the Waiting Room – a unique and thought-stirring devotional designed just for your situation!

The Adam & Eve Project fiction mystery novel by Donna Dawson

As children across the globe disappear in random kidnappings, Adolph Hitler, under the instruction of a secret committee works toward creating the perfect race. http://blogcritics.org/archives/2007/02/03/090258.php www.authordonnadawson.com

Etobicoke ON Mitchell Family Bookstore December 12 from 1 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Through Fire & Sea (Winner of Canadian Word Guild Award) Marilyn Meyers

Adventures on a Mercy Ship – one family's dramatic journey to bring hope and healing to the world's forgotten poor.

Praise: The Gateway to Miracles by Marianne Novoselac

Break through with the power of praise, a message of hope and healing that is touching thousands.

Willowdale ON Mitchell Family Bookstore December 12 from 1 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Angel in the Alley by Keith Clemons

Seven year old Angela is dying and wants to spend her final days withher family but her Father, Peter Dufoe, is on the run for distributing Bibles over the internet.

Seven Angels for Seven Days by Angelina Fast-Vlaar

Following the author's endlessly engaging adventure through the Australian outback, brings readers swiftly into an experience where God is the only one to turn to. Www.angelinafastvlaar.com

Willowdale ON Mitchell Family Bookstore December 12 evening from 6 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.

Glitter of Diamonds by N. J. Lindquist

After a Toronto sports radio talk-show host advocates knocking sense into the home team's new pitcher, Manziuk and Ryan chase a murderer swinging a lethal bat.

The Spiritual Brain: A neuroscientist's case for the existence of the soul by Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary (San Francisco: Harper One 2007)

See **Canadian Christian authors** *on page 6*

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Perspective

An elephant in the World Religions classroom

Eternal Student
Peter Schuurman

There is a story that you often hear in discussions of world religions. It is a parable that is supposed to put to rest all the discussions about which religion is the true religion. It goes something like this:

A number of blind men bumped into an elephant in a large room one day. They had not encountered such a creature before, so each reached out to touch and identify it. Because they encountered different parts of the elephant, they came up with different interpretations.

"An elephant is like a rope," said a blind man as the tail swished his face.

"No," said another who was touching the ear. "It's like a carpet."

"You're both wrong," added the third who sat beside the elephant's leg. "It's like a tree stump."

In sum, this parable teaches that we all sense different parts of God and each is a little bit right and a little bit wrong. Together, maybe, we approach the truth.

Now if you think of this parable with respect to our fallible, interpretation-based human nature, it works. We are all limited in our capacity to know, and depending on where you are positioned in life on this planet, you will come up with a different feeling for what is really real. Our worldview is relative to where we come from and who we grow with. *That goes for everybody.*

The "Catch"

There is a "catch" here, however. The parable says much more than the fact that we all see through a glass darkly. It says we all sense the same God. This is the key: who is it that sees the one *true interpretation* – the objective reality that all blind men are touching the same thing, and that the thing is actually an elephant? How does this narrator know that they do not grasp different objects, imaginary things, or even are making deliberate fibs? In other words, how did the elephant get into the story?

John Bowen warns us about this story in his book *Evangelism for 'Normal" People* (Fortress, 2002). He says that the job of parables is to illustrate a point of view. That is to say, if you already believe that all religions have an equally valid hold on the truth, this story illustrates that belief quite well. It doesn't *prove* anything. The fact is that it is a story from the eastern mystics, and it supports the worldview of eastern mysticism very well.

Lesslie Newbigin, in his book *Open Secret* (Eerdmans, 1995), unveils the story in more detail. He says that in a Hindu version of the tale, a king put the elephant in the midst of the blind men in order to amuse his courtiers and teach them that "the diverse religions of the world are but the gropings of blind men after a truth much too great for any human mind to grasp." The question is, if the blind men represent all the religions of the world, who does the king – the one who "sees" all things clearly – represent? Who is this who escapes all the limitations of a religious perspective? The king, of course, is the enlightened mystic, looking down upon all the confused world religions.

In contemporary terms, the king would be your local mystic, Unitarian, Bahai student, or tolerance-advocating relativist. They see those who hold to a particular faith, like the blind men, as misguided, if not pitiable or silly. But how did these kings come to "see" everything so clearly? What right do they have to feel superior? By what evidence do they trump everyone else in the world?

There is no evidence here. Only a story steeped in a deep faith. Bowen concludes: "In a strange reversal, the very story that argues against 'objective truth' itself claims to be objective truth. What appears at first sight to be a liberal analogy actually imposes its view just as oppressively as the views it is mocking and relativising." In other words, those who accuse others of being "exclusivistic" may, in fact, be the most offensive and imperialistic of all. There is an elephant in the classroom, and its the old claim to universal, objective knowledge. It's another religion in disguise.

Inevitable particularity

Newbigin sympathizes with the feeling behind the parable. He says "it is very understandable that we should look for some point of view that would enable us to bring together these clashing commitments in a single framework. It is understandable, but we have to face the fact that it is impossible." We can only see things from within our own framework of meaning. *We have no standpoint except the point from which we stand.* No one floats above tradition, religion, or worldview commitments. We are all limited by the scandal of our own particularity.

So rather than feeling superior to those who think differently from us, we need to see others as standing in faith commitments just as we are. This means rather than dismissing them, we ought to engage them and challenge them with our own stories even as we listen and learn from their stories. There will be both interesting similarities and significant differences. Our stories will reveal whom we trust, what world we imagine and strive for, and what God we claim to serve.

Consider a Christian story like this:

A great inventor owned an impressive ant farm. He loved his ant farm as if it were his own family.

Unfortunately, he noticed many of the ants attacked one another and vandalized the tank. He tried talking to them, instructing them, but they didn't listen. So he did a drastic thing: he invented a way to transmogrify a version of himself into an ant. As an ant in his own ant farm, he taught the ants his way of love and family, and told them of his dreams for the ant farm to grow and flourish.

Unfortunately, many of the ants rejected his story. Some had their own stories that they held to be better. Others mocked him, rejected him, and eventually beat him and killed him. He died without retaliating.

Some ants were inspired by his example. They actually believed that he came back to life and instructed them to carry on his practice of love and family. They held that someday he would come back again and make a whole new world of the ant farm.

In this story, we are not blind men looking at an elephant, but ants beholding an incarnated human-ant. This is because in the Christian story God is revealed to us in our own image and likeness. We do not fumble in the dark for him as much as he enters the dark to reach out to us.

He is not ineffable, unknowable, and distant, but mysteriously near, caught up in our mess, agitating for peace. From there, he calls all who will follow to become his new community of shalom. We are not distinguished by our enlightened thinking, but by our gratitude for forgiveness and our willing recruitment for service on the farm.

In this sense, Christian faith is not just one religion among many that all ultimately meld into one. Some basics in religious stories are fundamentally different. Our story is centered on the incarnated God in Jesus Christ of Nazareth and his life, death and resurrection. It is a story of God self-revealed rather than God groped-for, God for a new creation rather than God in-creation. It is God coming to us in grace rather than God eluding us in darkness. May we grow deeper into that grand narrative as we dialogue and debate with others.

Peter Schuurman is the Christian Reformed Education Mission Leader and resides in Guelph, Ontario.

Canadian Christian authors *...cont from p.5*

The Spiritual Brain, written for an average reader, shows the science evidence that the human mind and soul really exist.

Pickering ON Mitchell Family Bookstore
December 12 from 1 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.

The Spiritual Brain: A neuroscientist's case for the existence of the soul by Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary (San Francisco: Harper One 2007)
The Spiritual Brain, written for an average reader, shows the science evidence that the human mind and soul really exist.

Glitter of Diamonds by N. J. Lindquist
After a Toronto sports radio talk-show host advocates knocking sense into the home team's new pitcher, Manziuk and Ryan chase a murderer swinging a lethal bat.

Whitby ON Mitchell Family Bookstore
December 12 from 1 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Not Easily Broken Ruth by Smith Meyer
Engaged to a handsome, ambitious young man, Ellie finds herself instead, married to her brother-in-law, an instant mother to her two young nieces.

To My Family...My Life by Diane Roblin-Lee
A Legacy Journal with Ethical Will Resources for the recording of your reflections, values, experiences and family history to convey wisdom and insight to upcoming generations.

Oshawa ON Mitchell Family Bookstore
December 12 from 1 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.

The Lightning File by Eric E. Wright
Reporter Josh Radley juggles marital turmoil and religious skepticism while seeking to crack an Arabic file holding the key to a terrorist plot targeting US interests from Canadian soil.

A Tale of Two Kingdoms by Heather A. Kendall
This book carefully traces the history of God's plan of salvation throughout the Bible and reveals the antagonism between Christ's kingdom and Satan's kingdom.

Kingston ON Mitchell Family Bookstore
December 12 from 1 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.

The Defilers by Deborah Gyapong
A police woman finds spiritual deliverance while pursuing a strange pastor she suspects of murder.

How Big Is Your Umbrella? Weathering the Storms of Life by Sheila Wray Gregoire
When all you can do is yell at God, How Big Is Your Umbrella helps you to hear what he is whispering back. A great book to give to a hurting friend when you don't know what to say!

* Please note, the Willowdale location is the only Mitchell bookstore with an additional evening signing on December 12.

Consumption quiz is a real eye opener

Lisa M. Petsche

Everybody wants what they don't have
Just a little bit more wouldn't be so bad
It's a funny little thing, it's kind of sad
I've squandered everything I've had.
– *Sevenglory,* Christian band

Over the past few years I've developed a special interest in environmental issues and attended a number of related lectures and workshops. One of the concepts repeatedly mentioned is the ecological footprint, a measure of the amount of biologically productive land and sea area needed to produce the resources we use and absorb the wastes we produce. Calculators have been developed for various groups, including individuals and families, school children and business owners. This week I went online to one of them, at www.myfootprint.org, to gauge the sustainability of my family's lifestyle.

The Ecological Footprint Quiz begins with demographic information such as the number of people in your household and the population of the city or town where you live. This is followed by sixteen questions addressing four areas: food, goods, shelter and mobility. Your total footprint is then calculated in square hectares. Summaries for each of the four categories are also included, so you can see where you rate highest. There are links to action pages that list simple but effective ways to decrease your footprint.

The average ecological footprint in Canada is 8.8 global hectares per person; our family came in at 6.5. While that's better than average, it's nothing to boast about, given this statistic that accompanied the results: "worldwide, there exist (only) 1.8 biologically productive global hectares per person." In other words, if everyone lived like our family, 3.6 planets would be needed. Yikes!

Our footprint is highest in the area of food consumption. Ideas for reducing it include creating a vegetable garden (a great family project), eating more meatless meals, cooking from scratch more often, planning more meals around foods that are in season, eating organic foods and choosing more foods that are locally grown and produced. The latter can be accomplished by frequenting farmers markets or visiting a farm to pick your own produce, which can be a fun and educational family activity.

Favourite fruits and vegetables can be enjoyed out of season by freezing, dehydrating or canning them. Who knows, making preserves together could become a wonderful family tradition.

As for organic food, purchasing an annual share of the produce from an area farm – part of a practice known as community-supported agriculture – is an increasingly popular option.

It didn't really surprise me to learn our footprint is lowest in the mobility category. Our home is within walking distance of numerous amenities, including a bus depot, medical centre and shopping mall. And neither my husband nor I has a lengthy commute to work. Both of our vehicles are second-hand and, as usual, will be driven until they're ready for the scrap yard. We use the smaller one as much as possible, consolidate trips and refrain from idling, which includes avoiding drive-through services.

Our efforts to date in other areas include replacing the incandescent light bulbs in our house with compact fluorescent bulbs; installing a backyard clothesline; eliminating the use of pesticides; sharing, borrowing or renting infrequently-needed equipment rather than buying it; and reducing our water consumption through various means.

In addition to altering our patterns of food consumption, we plan to work at using our own shopping bags more often, avoiding items with heavy (if any) packaging, buying second-hand more frequently, buying less stuff, and just generally living more simply, consuming less and generating less waste.

While each step we take to reduce our ecological footprint may seem small-scale, our actions can, in fact, make a difference, especially when combined with the efforts of others.

Not only does living lightly help ensure the viability of our planet, it also helps us to focus on what's really important – the things money can't buy – and to live in peace and joy with all of God's creation.

Here are some web sites to check out:
- Earth Day Network, www.earthday.net, a sponsor of the Ecological Footprint Quiz.
- David Suzuki Foundation, www.davidsuzuki.org – Join the Nature Challenge.
- Canadian Organic Growers, www.cog.ca – Download the Niagara Organic Growers Directory published by the Niagara Chapter.

Lisa M. Petsche is a mother of three and freelance family life writer.

A home vegetable garden is one way to reduce your ecological footprint.

Reflections on Stewardship

Rick De Graaf

Annual checkup

Time for a checkup! I've been procrastinating long enough so finally I called and set the time for an appointment! Why do I procrastinate? It is not that I don't think it is important, but still I neglect to do it on a timely basis.

A friend of mine told me about his habit of linking his annual checkup with Remembrance Day. For him, it is a rite-of-preparation for the winter ahead, so he books appointments for an annual checkup for himself and his car.

Having an annual checkup is a good thing. Maybe it's my age, but, it seems that wherever I turn I hear of someone in my extended family or church family or even our circle of friends who has been diagnosed with some sort of cancer. It's scary and depressing!

Having an annual checkup is good stewardship of the 'temple,' the body that God has entrusted to my care. Under the professional scrutiny of a doctor I find out about the state of my health. A good and caring doctor will identify and encourage us to address some of the bad habits – like overeating and lack of exercise – which we have allowed to creep into our lifestyles. That annual checkup, as unpleasant as it may be to be poked, prodded, blood sampled and queried, is an important part of a program of good care for our bodies. We should not take good health for granted, but rather we need to be disciplined in our care for our bodies.

So, why not go one step further, and link your annual medical checkup to an annual spiritual checkup? The best way, I find is to set aside some time for reflection – serious reflection. Consider how you have done in terms of regularly setting aside time for prayer and spiritual nurture. Ask yourself: "Am I regularly spending time in prayer, Bible study, reflection, and reading material that helps me stretch my faith through new insights? Have I grown in the time that I invest in ministry to others?" Good questions to dwell on and to pray and be honest about before God.

Another spiritual aspect of our lives is the giving back to God of some of what he has given to us in the first place. Giving is a spiritual thermometer that measures the 'temperature' of our gratitude for what Christ has done for us. If our giving is low – why is that so? Especially when we consider the considerable debt of our sin which has a death sentence on it! Jesus illustrated the contrast so clearly in the parable of the unmerciful servant, and a key sentence stands out: "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" Matthew18:33.

God's grace to us is life for today and forevermore! Heartfelt giving is a spiritual gratitude response that acknowledges his grace. Which makes a time out for a checkup on giving an important annual practice. Doing that checkup now is prudent since the year-end is approaching and we still have time to take full advantage of income tax reductions for 2007.

An annual checkup: physically, spiritually and practically is a good thing to do. Why not do it now?

Stewardly tip: Birthday = Annual checkup
Our neighbourhood fire chief reminds us to check our smoke detector batteries whenever we have to change the clock for a time change. It's a good habit. In a similar way it would be a good habit to associate an annual checkup with our birthday. You could ask your wife/husband (if married) to be an accountability partner so that it actually gets done. Be sure to put it on the family calendar!

Readers: Share your 'Stewardly Tips' so that we all can make better use of the resources God has entrusted to us. Submit your suggestions (by mail to *Christian Courier* or by email to my address below) and provide your contact information so that we can acknowledge your contribution or ask you for more details.

Next issue: A Generous Attitude

Rick DeGraaf works for Christian Stewardship Services in Markham, Ontario Rick's email: rickd@csservices.ca

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Church

Canadian churches debate military role in Afghanistan

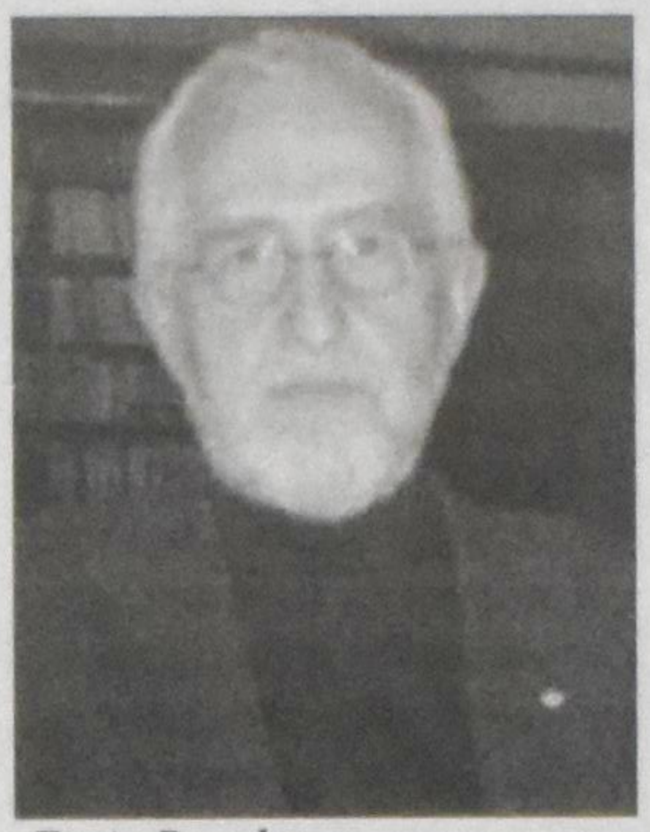
Kristine Greenaway

Toronto (ENI) – A peace advisor to the Canadian Council of Churches says churches in the North American country are playing a justifiable and necessary role in public debate about the country's military presence in Afghanistan.

"We shouldn't stay on the sidelines and let those who are not wary of the use of force be the only voices," says Ernie Regehr, a senior advisor with Project Ploughshares, the Canadian Council of Churches' agency for peace and security issues.

Churches and religious organizations must be tireless advocates of energetic diplomacy leading to a negotiated settlement, Regehr told Ecumenical News International during an interview in Toronto. Churches need to add balance to the views of those who see military action as the sole effective way to restore order, he added.

As a member of the World Council of Churches' Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, Regehr helped formulate a statement on the right of the international community to infringe on national sovereignty in order to protect people in extreme peril. The World Council of Churches adopted the statement at its ninth assembly in Puerto Alegre, Brazil, in 2006. The statement admits that there are situations where military intervention is necessary to protect civilian populations while the conditions for sustainable peace are being negotiated through diplomatic channels.



Ernie Regehr

The Canadian Council of Churches is seeking endorsement from its members for the principle, dubbed "the right to protect", amidst mounting concern in Canada about the cost and effectiveness of the country's current military mission to Afghanistan.

In August, leaders of 12 Canadian churches wrote to Prime Minister Stephen Harper and called for priority to be placed on supporting negotiation and strengthened investment in reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. In the letter, the leaders called on their government to "build peace with the people of Afghanistan rather than pursue a war on terror".

In Afghanistan, Canada has about 2,500 troops fighting alongside 40,000 NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces. Since 2002, a total of 72 military personnel and one diplomat have been killed in Afghanistan. Some commentators and analysts are countering those seeking a downscaling of troops with calls for a doubling of

Japanese pastor given ultimatum in communion dispute

Hisashi Yukimoto

Tokyo (ENI) – A pastor of Japan's largest Protestant denomination says he will refuse an ultimatum from church leaders to resign if he does not stop allowing unbaptised people to receive Holy Communion.

"I will ignore or refuse the recommendation," the Rev. Jiro Kitamura, a pastor of the United Church of Christ in Japan, told Ecumenical News International.

The denomination's executive, of which Kitamura is a member, passed a resolution in late October stating that the minister must stop giving Communion to unbaptised people in his church at Yokohama, south of Tokyo, or resign.

Kitamura received support, however, from more than 2,000 people, who signed a petition demanding the withdrawal of the resolution, which the denomination's moderator, the Rev. Nobuhisa Yamakita, had introduced.

Sixteen members of the committee, out of the 29 who were present, supported the resolution.

It followed a statement by the Rev. Tomoyuki Okamoto, chairperson of the denomination's Faith and Order committee, that any decision by local congregations to approve sharing Holy Communion with those who had not been baptised is "void" and "violates the denomination's rules".

Okamoto quoted the denomination's regulations that stipulate that the church's believers "must be registered separately as communicant members and pre-communicant members", and that, "Communicant members are those who confessed their faith and were baptised, or pre-communicants who confirmed or confessed their faith."

In a message to the denomination's 2007 general assembly, moderator Yamakita wrote that allowing the unbaptised to receive Holy Communion, "clearly violates the constitution and rules" of the church.

Kitamura said, however, that many other churches within the denomination have been providing "open" Holy Communion since the 1970s.

US Christian leaders endorse Muslim call for common ground

Chris Herlinger

New York (ENI) – US Christian leaders, including traditional Protestants and evangelical Christians, have endorsed a document that responds positively to a call by Muslim leaders seeking common ground between Christian and Islamic religious traditions.

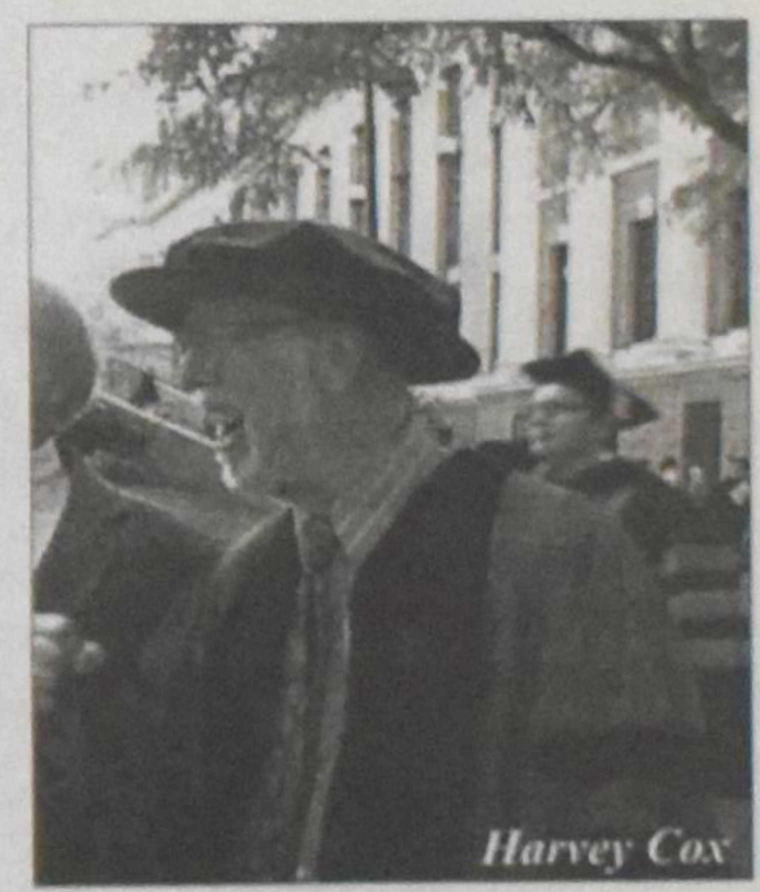
Nearly 300 Christian leaders have now endorsed the document, "Loving God and Neighbour Together". It calls for both Christian and Muslim leaders to commit themselves to "the earnest work of determining how God would have us fulfil the requirement that we love God and one another".

The statement was published as a full-page advertisement in the November 18 edition of *The New York Times* newspaper. It was endorsed by, among others, John Thomas, the president and general minister of the United Church of Christ, and Harvey Cox, the theologian based at Harvard Divinity School, as well as by prominent evangelical leaders such as Rick Warren, author of "The Purpose Driven Life". Also signing was Robert Schuller, the founder of the California-based ministry, Crystal Cathedral/Hour of Power.

Four Yale Divinity School scholars including the school's dean, Harold Attridge, originally endorsed the Christian document following the release of a widely-publicised October 2007 letter, "A Common Word Between Us and You", by 138 Muslim clerics, intellectuals and scholars.

That Islamic document, the Christian leaders said, identified "some core common ground between Christianity and Islam which lies at the heart of our respective faiths as well as at the heart of the most ancient Abrahamic faith, Judaism".

The leaders added, "We receive the open letter as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians worldwide. In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and our neighbours."



Harvey Cox

In a statement, Attridge, the Yale dean, said, "In a climate where the voices of extremism and intolerance are heard loud and clear, it is important that men and women of good will on both sides of that religious fault line reach out and affirm the values that they share."

He noted that the Muslim document "presented an extraordinary opportunity to effect that outreach and further constructive communication between the religious leadership of the Christian and Muslim worlds".

Shift in Dutch Bible-reading from faith book to literary work

Andreas Havinga

Utrecht, Netherlands (ENI) – Church attendance may be falling in the Netherlands but the Bible is still held high in public esteem, though increasingly as a piece of world literature rather than as a book of faith, according to a Dutch researcher.

"Despite the secularisation of the past decades, the possession and use of the Bible have not declined but remained stable. The Bible continues to stand its ground," the researcher, Gert de Jong, said at a November 2 conference organized by the Netherlands Bible Society in Doorn.

An estimated two out of three people in the Netherlands own a Bible.

What has changed, de Jong noted, is the nature of people's esteem for the Bible, which is shifting away from its being seen as forming the basis of religious faith, towards being valued as world literature.

"From a book for Christianity, and thus of the Church, it becomes a book of and for everyone," said de Jong. He was presenting the findings of a research project commissioned by the Netherlands Bible Society and carried out by the KASKI research institute, which specialises in policy research about religion and philosophy.

The Netherlands Bible Society conference was held to take stock of the impact on Dutch society of an interconfessional Bible translation launched in October 2004.

Spectacular sales of the *New Bible Translation* made it the second best-selling book in the Netherlands during its launch year. One of several different editions was produced to appeal to readers interested in the Bible as literature.

"On a national level one sees a tendency that more conservative beliefs about the Bible are losing ground, like it being the infallible word of God, or a guideline for one's actions," said de Jong, a researcher with KASKI. "At the same time, support is strong for statements such as 'The Bible is world literature,' or 'The Bible is of and for everyone'."

This opened the way, he suggested, for the Bible to contribute to "post-modern spirituality", as a source of value and wisdom, as a "key to understanding our culture", and as a "source of social capital and good actions".

The New Bible Translation (NBV) was published in October 2004 by the Netherlands and Flanders Bible Societies together with Roman Catholic Bible foundations in the Netherlands and Flanders.

Prepare for shift in global Christianity says world church leader

During his visit, Kobia also joined the call by church leaders in the Philippines to free Pastor Berlin Guerrero who has been jailed since his abduction on May 27, 2006.

Maurice Malanes

Manila (ENI) – Asia and Africa may become the centre of gravity for 21st century Christianity, says World Council of Churches general secretary the Rev. Samuel Kobia, who has challenged Philippine church leaders to prepare for this shift.

"Christianity is declining in Europe but growing in Asia and Africa," Kobia, a Methodist from Kenya, told bishops and other church leaders on November 19 in Manila. He said this situation raised at least two questions: "What kind of Christianity can we have in the future?" And, "Will the churches from Asia and Africa re-evangelise Europe?"

The WCC leader said that church buildings in Europe were being sold to Muslims, who were converting them into mosques, and to business people, who were transforming the churches into hotels, restaurants and other commercial centres.

On the other hand, Filipino churches had begun to spread their reach overseas as they sought to minister to legions of Filipinos seeking overseas jobs, said the WCC general secretzry.

Kobia and a WCC team are on an November 18-21 visit to this predominantly Roman Catholic Southeast Asian nation of 86 million people. The WCC groups 347 churches, principally from Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox traditions.

He was speaking to the leaders of the member churches of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, which groups mainly Protestant and Anglican denominations.

During the meeting, the Rev. Joel del Rosario of the Episcopal Church of the Philippines reported how his denomination is working with Catholic priests to help address the concerns of overseas Filipino workers.

"One big challenge is to help ensure that the earnings of overseas Filipino workers are not fleeced by commercial and government banks. So, we are contemplating establishing an international bank for overseas workers," said Del Rosario.

"At the same time, we have to address the continuing concern for the spirituality of our overseas workers," he added, citing the psychological effects of separation, with which, he said, both the worker and his or her family have to live.

There are reportedly about 10 million overseas Filipino workers in the Middle East, Hong Kong, Europe, the United States, Canada and other places around the world, not including undocumented migrants. This makes Filipinos the third largest group of migrant workers worldwide, after Indians and Indonesians.

Other NCCP members, such as the United Methodist Church in the Philippines, the Salvation Army, and the Philippine Independent Church, have also begun responding to the needs of overseas migrant workers.

"The ministry to migrant workers is really a big challenge because we lack priests, especially trained clergy, to minister to our migrant workers," said Bishop Godofredo David of the Philippine Independent Church.

While NCCP members are expanding their reach overseas, churches that do not belong to the council are reported to be more advanced in extending their churches abroad.

Pentecostal and charismatic fellowships have been sending Filipino missionaries overseas to places such as the United States and Europe since the 1990s, Pastor Octavio Muncada of the Good News Fellowship told Ecumenical News International.

Young people turn to Christianity in Hindu-dominated Nepal

Anto Akkara

Katmandu (ENI) – When Raju Lama embraced Christianity at the age of 16, his Buddhist parents were furious and virtually expelled him from the family home near the Nepalese capital of Katmandu.

Undeterred, Lama, who became a Christian in 1989, began trying to persuade his parents to do the same. Ten years later that persistence paid off, and his parents converted to Christianity, followed by his sisters and brother.

"I am happy I could persuade my family members to become Christians," said Lama, who is now the president of the United Christian Youth Fellowship in Katmandu valley.

Lama spoke to Ecumenical News International during an assembly of his youth network that took place during the Hindu Diwali holidays at the independent Anugraha Vijay (Grace Victory) Church at Kapan Bekha in Katmandu.

"It is the youth who are at the centre of the growth of the church here (in Nepal)," Lama told ENI.

Before 1991, the number of Christians in this Hindu-dominated country was estimated to be around 50 000. Then, a new constitution was adopted following pro-democracy protests that led to a limited multiparty democracy under the monarchy.

The new constitution retained an existing ban on conversions but also eased some of the restrictions on religious freedom. Consequently, police and State officials stopped prosecuting Christians who engaged in evangelising.

This led to sudden spurt in the growth of Christians in Nepal, and it is estimated that there are now more than 800,000 Christians in 6,000 independent church congregations among the country's population of 29 million people.

Rajkumar Shrestha, a Hindu who had migrated to Katmandu from his native village of Sindu Palchok in search of employment, became a Christian four years ago after he came into contact with church workers.

"My family members scolded me when I told this news to them," Shrestha told ENI during the youth meeting. Yet, Shrestha was also successful in winning his family over and in persuading them to accept the Christian faith.

Of the 70 participants at the youth assembly, only eight were born into Christian families, while the rest are recent converts.

Robin Baidhya, a Hindu who embraced Christianity in 1995, pointed out that Nepali youth who are "disenchanted" with the current socio-political situation in Nepal, are looking "at Christianity with new hope for a change in life". Baidhya explained that church congregations are providing young people with regular training in music, sports and personality development. This, he said, is attracting young Nepalese to Christianity.

Lying at foot of the Himalayas and sandwiched between India and China, Nepal is one of the poorest nations in Asia, and has sparse civic and educational facilities.

"Youth are providing a vital link in a flourishing of Christianity," said Pastor Simon Gurung, president of the National Christian Council of Nepal, to which the youth are affiliated.

However, Gurung noted that the churches are 'handicapped' because scattered and tiny congregations mostly engage in evangelisation work and do not have institutions to provide employment for the young people.

"Unless we begin developing social service centres, their enthusiasm could fade away in the long run," cautioned Gurung, who had been imprisoned twice for preaching Christianity before the curbs on freedom of religion were eased in 1991.

Europe church group warns on EU deals with poorer countries

Stephen Brown and Fredrick Nzwili

Geneva/Nairobi (ENI) – Europe's biggest church grouping has warned that a new series of trade deals between the European Union and countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) could hinder an equitable global trading system.

"We are convinced that it would be counter-productive to push ACP countries into signing ambitious trade agreements for which they have limited negotiation capacity," the Conference of European Churches said in a November 19 statement after a meeting of its main governing body in Vienna.

The European Union wants to sign new economic partnership agreements (EPAs) with almost 80 countries in Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific by the end of 2007.

ACP countries have had privileged access to EU markets for three decades but this has been declared illegal under World Trade Organization rules. The new agreements would require ACP countries to liberalise their imports from the EU in return for their access to EU.

The British development agency, Christian Aid, has warned that free trade between an established, wealthy trading bloc like the EU and poorer economies will destroy farmers and industries in developing countries.

Christian Aid points to Mozambique, where the government has placed a tax on imported flour to offer its own industry a measure of protection. "Signing an EPA will mean opening up the Mozambican market to cheap flour, threatening the viability of the milling industry and certainly preventing it from developing further," Christian Aid states.

EU officials have said demands by anti-poverty groups and some African nations to keep the existing aid-and-trade accord in place is not an option.

"We appeal to the EU to ensure that trade deals with the ACP countries will not be stumbling blocks but stepping stones and building blocks for a more just and equitable global trading system," said CEC, which groups about 120 mostly Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches.

Kenya announced on November 16 that East African nations had reached an interim accord with the European Union. This would open up their markets to European products as long as these did not affect "sensitive agricultural and industrial products" in the region.

"We are not ready. I would like to see negotiation continue so that we are not forced to sign an agreement that will open another chapter to oppress our people," said Kenyan Anglican Bishop Gideon Ireri of Mbeere earlier this year.

He accused European nations of trying to divide up Africa between themselves, as they did at the Berlin Conference of 1885 that partitioned the African continent between the colonising powers from Europe. "This is a repeat of the same thing," Ireri told Ecumenical News International (ENI).

Farmers and civil society groups have also organized protests in the Kenyan capital against the proposed trade agreements. "My produce is small. My price is also small," said Michael Gitau, a farmer from central Kenya. "It will be crushed by the agreement."

Environment

How to fight a rising sea

What the Netherlands has done – and is urgently planning to do – in the face of climate-driven sea-level rise holds important lessons for the rest of the world.

Peter N. Spotts

Dordrecht, Netherlands – The Dutch enjoy a hard-earned reputation for building river dikes and sea barriers. Over centuries, they have transformed a flood-prone river delta into a wealthy nation roughly twice the size of New Jersey.

If scientific projections for global warming are right, however, that success will be sorely tested. Globally, sea levels may rise up to a foot during the early part of this century, and up to nearly three feet by century's end. This would bring higher tidal surges from the more-intense coastal storms that scientists also project, along with the risk of more frequent and more severe river floods from intense rainfall inland.

Nowhere does this aquatic vise squeeze more tightly than on the world's densely populated river deltas.

So why is one of the most famous deltas – the Netherlands – breaching some river dikes and digging up some of the rare land in this part of the country that rises (barely) above sea level?

In the Biesbosch, a small inland delta near the city of Dordrecht, ecologist Alphons van Winden looks out his car window at a lone excavator filling a dump truck with soil. He considers the question and laughs. "We do have a hard time explaining this to foreigners," he says.

The work here represent a keystone in the country's climate-adaptation plans, Mr. van Winden says. Indeed, nowhere are adaptation planning efforts to address rising sea levels and flooding more advanced than in the Netherlands.

To be sure, the country's economic wealth and long experience dealing with threats from seas and rivers give it an advantage over other low countries that face rising waters, such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, and the tiny tropical island nation of Tuvalu in the South Pacific. But many of the approaches the Netherlands is taking can and are being slowly adopted even in countries far poorer, specialists say.

The excavation work here is one example of what van Winden calls "soft approaches" to flooding in this small nation where competing interests jostle for every square foot of land. By buying out the few farmers remaining in this region, breaching the dikes they built to protect their land, and digging additional water channels, the Dutch government aims to reduce peak flood flows at Dordrecht and other cities downstream. No longer will tightly constricted river and canal channels hold high water captive. Big floods will overspread the Biesbosch, reducing the threat of water spilling over the top of levees that guard densely populated cities to the west.

The Biesbosch may also be critical to the future of farming on the productive southwest coast. There, most of the area's fresh water sources are close to the coast – and vulnerable to salt-water contamination from a rising North Sea. This could make farming difficult, if not impossible. The Biesbosch, however, hosts three large reservoirs, each surrounded by a 20-foot-high dike. Fresh water piped from these reservoirs, some 50 miles inland, could keep coastal areas supplied.

1. 4 billion live near seacoast

Globally, some 21 percent of the world's 6.6 billion people live within 20 miles of a seacoast – and nearly 40 percent within 60 miles, says Robert Nicholls, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at the University of Southampton in England.

Seacoast populations who face the greatest risk from floods, storms, and sea-level rise live on river deltas, says the UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

In the IPCC's latest set of reports on the impact of global warming, released earlier this year, scientists looked at data from 40 of the globe's river deltas, home to 300 million people. If current trends continue through 2050, flooding in the Nile, Mekong, and Ganges-Brahmaputra river deltas could each displace more than 1 million people. Up to a million more may be forced to head for higher ground in each of another nine deltas, including the Mississippi River delta. Up to 50,000 could be forced to relocate in each of 12 other deltas, including the Rhine River delta – an area known more widely as the Netherlands.

Besides global warming, scientists say the challenges these regions face have other causes as well. Levees, sea walls, drainage canals, dams, and other land-use patterns have taken a toll. Deltas tend to subside (sink) naturally, accentuating the rise in sea level. Past engineering projects can actually limit the ability of natural processes to replenish the land mass of deltas.

A patch of the Netherlands between Rotterdam and Gouda, called Zuidplaspolder, highlights the issue in a way that New Orleans might recognize. The 19-square-mile area is bounded by dikes and the Gouwe River. Face the river, and the landscape looks like a typical river plain. But turn and face Zuidplaspolder, and you see a steep decline dropping more than 20 feet. The huge dimple in the delta stretches as far as the eye can see.

It's the lowest spot in Europe, some 23 feet below sea level.

"And it's all subsidence," says Willemien Croes, a planner with the provincial government of South Holland. Over the centuries, residents dug up thick layers of peat to warm their homes in Gouda, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam, she says. Much of Zuidplaspolder then filled with water. Farmers pumped it dry, grew crops, and raised dairy herds on the rich clay and peat. When the soil settled, farmers ringed the area with dikes for protection.

This picture is taken of the lowest spot in the Netherland, in the 'zuidplaspolder' near 'Nieuwerkerk aan den IJssel'. The spot, in the picture situated quite near the horizon is situated 6,74 meter, (over 22 feet) below 'NAP', the average level of the North Sea. Without human interference, the water would reach the lamp on top of the lamppost.

The area's low elevation and the anticipated increased future risk of floods, combined with development pressures from Rotterdam and Gouda, have turned this area into one of the country's biggest adaptation challenges. But it's hardly alone: Some 60 percent of the country, accounting for 70 percent of its gross domestic product, lies below sea level.

These sinking lowlands are protected along the coast by sand dunes, dikes, and sea barriers that stretch across the mouths of estuaries. These natural and engineered defenses have protected millions from the North Sea since a devastating storm surge hit the country in 1953. But these defenses have come at an ecological cost. Unlike river deltas such as the Mississippi's, which grew as sediment washed downriver from deep in the North American interior, the Dutch delta was built by the sea. Currents swirling through the Strait of Dover since the end of the last ice age eroded the white cliffs and deposited the material along the Dutch coast.

That process has slowed substantially, says van Winden, who works for Stroming, an environmental consulting firm in Nijmegen. Although the delta drains three of Europe's major rivers – the Rhine, Meuse, and Scheldt – the rivers never carried enough sediment to build the delta, and don't carry enough silt to maintain it today. From that standpoint, he says, over the long term "we are living beyond our means."

Dutch humble in face of rising threat

Faced with the twin threats of increased river flooding from inland storms and higher ocean storm surges as the climate warms and sea levels rise, the country aims to meet these challenges with a variety of approaches, ranging from complex engineering to "natural." But it's doing so with increased humility, given the levee failures in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina in 2005.

"If you want a caricature of the Netherlands, it's: 'We have the dikes; we are 100 percent safe. So just go on with your life,' "says Pieter Bloemen, who runs the government's Adaptation Program for Spatial Planning and Climate. But these days, "even we proud Dutch, with climate change in the back of our heads, have to think about broken dikes. That's a big paradigm shift."

Zuid-plas-polder is a case in point. As the lowest real estate in one of the Netherlands' most vulnerable provinces, it has become a test bed for factoring water and climate change into zoning and development plans. In the next 20 years, 15,000 to 30,000 new housing units will be built here. Anticipating this growth, in 2004, officials from provincial and local governments joined with nongovernmental organizations to develop a master plan for the polder. (A polder is a large tract of land containing farms and villages encircled by dikes. The dikes offer flood protection, but they also turn the polders into enormous bathtubs with bottoms that slowly, inexorably sink.)

The new homes that rise in the polder may look nothing like those in the villages the Dutch are used to, Mr. Bloemen says. To deal with floods, homes on this higher ground could be designed to float in place or built on stilts. They may sport tall ground floors, with living space and utilities placed on higher floors. Entire villages might be built to float in place, linked by buoyant sidewalks and roads.

In addition, he adds, officials may ask developers to use a technique that dates back centuries: building houses, even whole villages, on mounds. That low-tech approach is appearing in other parts of the world, too. Oxfam International is working with villages in Bangladesh to build individual homes and even small villages on flood-resistant mounds.

In the Netherlands, river floods are a top item on the climate-change adaptation

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must-fix list. To be sure, the country has tried to be forward-looking in tackling flood control and sea-level rise, notes Hans Balvoort, with the Netherlands' Ministry of Public Works, Transport, and Water Management. It typically uses a 50-year planning horizon. But a wake-up call came in the 1990s, "when, for the first time, rainfall was so heavy and intense that our pumping systems could not cope," he says.

Powerful pumps long ago replaced the signature windmills as the way to keep the polders from flooding. "On such a large scale," he says, the inability of pumps to keep pace with rainfall was "something we had not experienced before."

Moreover, for two winters during that decade, flooded rivers rose so high that officials evacuated some 250,000 people out of concern that levees might not hold. Instead of building large numbers of new levees, he continues, scientists, engineers, and officials looked for other ways to store flood waters over the short term to reduce the risk.

The Biesbosch project, with its dike removal, or "depoldering," is one approach. The government also is working on a range of other strategies to give flooded rivers more room to flow. They might spread dikes farther apart, excavate land between river and dikes (to capture overflow), deepen central river channels, remove jettylike groins that now force most of the flow into the center of a river, remove other obstructions, and even add new channels to the flood plain or restore old ones.

Storm surge is biggest coastal worry

The government plans to spend €2.2 billion ($3.2 billion) to make these changes to its rivers. Meanwhile, along the coast, the big worry is not about any average increase in sea level, which scientists project to rise here between 35 and 85 cm (14 to 33 inches) by 2100. Instead, the biggest concern is the change in storm-surge patterns that will ride atop that rise, says Pier Vellinga, who heads the climate program at Wageningen University.

As if to highlight this point, last weekend Britain and the Netherlands closed their sea barriers in the face of a storm in the North Sea that sent a 13-foot surge bearing down on their coasts.

Planners in other countries often design for a once-every-hundred-years storm. While that approach can be useful, the challenge is that climate change may throw those projections out of whack. For example, some researchers say that in the US Northeast, midcentury coastal winter storms could lead to flood levels every three or four years – floods of a severity that used to occur only once every 100 years. Netherlands planners aim for a 10,000-year storm for the country's most vulnerable areas. And even that may be inadequate, Dr. Vellinga says.

"When you do an economic assessment of the damage," he says, "and what you can afford to [spend to] avoid that damage, a better safety level would be a recurrence of 1 in 100,000 years." One storm like that could cost the country up to a year's worth of gross domestic product – €500 billion ($730 billion).

In 1990, the government decided to maintain the country's existing coastline by replenishing its extensive phalanx of coastal dunes using enormous deposits of sand that lie far offshore – another geological gift delivered over millennia from the English Coast to the Netherlands.

Three years ago, the government added that it will strive not only to maintain the coastline at its current position, but also to maintain the shape of the current offshore slope to a depth of about 130 feet. Today, that means dredging and depositing nearly 16 million cubic yards of sand along the coast each year. So, as the sea level rises, the dunes will, too, says Joost Stronkhoorst, with the National Institute for Coastal and Marine Management at The Hague.

Offshore sand deposits are large enough to allow the Dutch to accommodate a rise in sea level up to 16 feet, he says. But the line of coastal dunes is not unbroken. The gaps are spanned by barriers that in some cases will

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Picture taken in Haamstede during the Flood of 1953

And it came to pass

Intangible Things

Heidi VanderSlikke

"The tragedy with growing up is not that we lose childishness in its simplicity, but that we lose childlikeness in its sublimity." – Ravi Zacharias

Sitting on a chair in Stephanie's old bedroom is the baby doll we gave her for Christmas when she was three and a half years old. In those days I allowed myself only one full day for Christmas shopping every year. Not wanting to get carried away with the enjoyment (and expense) of buying gifts, I restricted myself to what could be accomplished in a single day. That year I searched the stores for the perfect doll for my little girl. I wanted one with blonde hair and blue eyes, just like Stephanie. But baby dolls weren't the rage at the time, and the only one I could find had auburn hair and brown eyes.

I brought it home, wrapped it up and put it under the tree. I still smile to think of Stephanie sitting on the floor so often that December, staring at the bright red and white box, fingering the ribbon and dreaming of what might be inside. I only hoped that when the time came for her to open it she wouldn't be disappointed in its contents. At long last the big day arrived. I handed her the package. She literally trembled with excitement as she tore off the paper. Her little face changed from anticipation to delight the instant she set eyes on the doll. The sudden pleasure I felt at that moment took me by surprise.

Passing by the doll these days I occasionally replay the scene in my mind. It occurs to me that God's children should be as excited about the true gift of Christmas as my daughter was about her baby doll. I sometimes think back to Christmases from my own childhood, and how I enjoyed the whole season, eagerly awaiting the day itself.

I attended public school in an era when no one apologized for using the word Christmas. For the entire month of December we had weekly assemblies, coming together as a whole school to sing Christmas songs – some playful, some meaningful. Already in mid-November our teacher would begin helping us to memorize Luke 2: 1-20. At the final assembly before Christmas vacation, we stood together, grades one through eight, and recited the story of Christ's birth in King James English, being careful to speak with choral expression exactly as we had been coached.

At the age of seven I learned from an older, wiser neighbor girl that Santa Claus wasn't real. It was devastating news. The same year, Mrs. Patterson, my grade two teacher, prefaced our memorization of the Luke passage by writing "Christmas" on the board and asking, "Have you ever noticed that the word 'Christmas' starts with someone's name?" I was sure she meant Chris, like the boy who sat two rows over. As obvious as it seems now, we were all surprised when she pointed out the name Christ in the first syllable.

For me it was an "aha" moment. Mrs. Patterson went on to tell us that the Bible passage we recited annually was the real story behind the season, and that only the songs about Christ's birth were legitimate Christmas carols, as much fun as Frosty and Rudolph might be. It's my first memory of consciously sorting the sacred from the secular. I think I did quite well, except I was in my twenties before realizing that the Little Drummer Boy wasn't a biblical figure.

I wish I could say there's been no problem in the years since then keeping a proper perspective of Christmas. Truthfully, it remains an issue which requires deliberate effort for me. Somewhere in between the baking, decorating, and family get-togethers I need to take time for quiet reflection. It would be a shame, no, a tragedy really, to lose a childlike wonder for the season. Maybe I'll dig out the King James and begin memorizing Luke 2 again. Not that I need another item on December's to-do list, and not as some kind of religious nostalgia, but to help me once again appreciate the significance of Advent and honestly yearn for Christmas.

It seems appropriate to spend a little time each day thinking of the young couple trekking across the Judean countryside to a crowded city and a makeshift shelter. Imagine the stillness of the night being broken by the first cry of God's newborn son, and his mother gently laying him in a feedbox. Picture the awe on their faces as they gazed at the child of promise, delivered to them by God himself, so much mystery and hope wrapped up in one tiny bundle.

I can't help but think it might bring joy to God's heart if I dare move beyond the glow of the nativity to remember that this child came for a holy purpose only he could fulfill. As John MacArthur sums it up, "Those tiny hands fashioned by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb were made to take two great nails. Those little feet were made to climb a hill and be nailed to a cross. That sacred head was made to wear a crown of thorns, and that tender body wrapped in swaddling clothes was made to be pierced by a spear. For this Christ came to earth. His death was the furthest thing from an accident.

And, despite the malignant evil that crucified him, his death was the furthest thing from a tragedy. It was God's ultimate plan for his Son and his ultimate gift for mankind."

In the simplicity of that manger we see the sublime beauty of God's love. Think about it. Drink it in. And don't be embarrassed to tremble with excitement as you celebrate this Christmas season.

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Memories of the Resistance (Part 2)

German invasion and occupation

Pieter Strayer

I had been working at the airport for two months or so when the war broke out. Early on the morning of May 10, 1940, large numbers of airplanes passed over – fighters and bombers. It was just becoming light, about 5 a.m. or so. A tremendous racket! There was all kinds of shooting. Bombs were falling. About 7 a.m. a plane was shot down.

I thought, "I'd better get to the airport!" After all, that was my job. When I got there, the soldiers guarding the airfield were terribly nervous. Most of the planes on the ground had been bombed, except for some that had been camouflaged. The place they were stored had been made to look like homes. They weren't very modern planes, of course; in fact, there was only one good one in the bunch, one with a double-decker tail. It was the only one that could get up any kind of speed; the rest were just cookie tins.

Every now and then another German plane would pass over. Someone would yell, "Here comes another one!" And all the soldiers would scatter into the fields surrounding the airfield. They spent more time hiding in Van Damme's fields than in the hangar. They even panicked at the sound of road traffic.

German soldiers

As the day wore on, we began loading everything into the trucks. The airport canteen was loaded into my truck, so I ended up with all the liquor, cigarettes, chocolate bars and so on. The soldiers also climbed into the trucks and we headed for Renesse, a town six kilometers away.

That night we slept in a school. The next day we moved to another town, and so on. Every time we arrived in a town, the people became frightened. They figured: "The Germans might land tonight and then the first thing they'll come after is these soldiers."

So when we arrived, the people flocked out of town to spend the night in the fields and ditches, carrying bundles of blankets. The soldiers were just as nervous as the people, and in the darkness people carrying blankets on their heads looked a lot like German paratroopers. One old woman was even shot at by a jumpy soldier.

About five or six days into the war, we ended up at Ouwerkerk. Then the sergeant said, "We're going back to Zierikzee."

When our caravan reached Sas, on the outskirts of Zierikzee, we were stopped by the Germans. They ordered me to climb onto the back of the truck with my load of bottles and chocolate bars and I had to drink one of the bottles and eat a chocolate bar to prove they were alright. I didn't mind that one bit.

Then I was ordered to get down and line up with all the military prisoners. The day we left, the weather had been nice, so I hadn't taken a coat, but later I had borrowed a military coat, so I looked like one of the soldiers. But my sergeant could speak German, and he said, "This fellow isn't a soldier; he's only a truck driver and he's wearing a borrowed coat."

One of the German soldiers came up to me and opened my coat. I was wearing a pair of overalls underneath, so he let me go.

Tonnie

I began walking along the Scheepstimmer Dyke towards Zierikzee. I had already been dating Tonnie at this time, but I had never met her father or been at her house. I was 23 years old, you see, and Tonnie was only 17, so of course I was much too old for her. That was frowned on. Tonnie lived on the Scheepstimmers Dyke near Zierikzee.

Soon I saw Tonnie's father and a neighbour lady in the distance. They were watching a squad of German soldiers marching along the dyke, singing. The neighbour lady said, "They're English!" But Tonnie's father said, "No, they're German."

When I reached them, they asked me, "Are those English soldiers or Germans?"

"They're Germans," I said. "They just confiscated my truck."

Tonnie's father did not know who I was. "Have you had anything to eat this morning?" he asked me. "Why don't you come in for a cup of tea?" So I followed him into the house.

He went upstairs to call Tonnie and her sister Dien, because they slept upstairs. He thought, "Maybe this fellow knows something about Tonnie's boyfriend that will put her mind at ease."

"There's a truck driver here from Haamstede!" he announced.

Tonnie hurried down, thinking, "Maybe he knows what happened to Piet."

When she entered the kitchen, she exclaimed, "It's you!"

Then the truth dawned on her father. He saw that, without knowing it, he had invited his future son-in-law into the house. That broke the ice. He lent me a bicycle to ride home to Haamstede. It had to be returned the next Sunday. After that I visited every week.

Truck driving

Later all cars and trucks on the island had to be driven to the German border and turned over to them. They did pay for them, but with our own money, of course. With all the trucks gone, all the jobs for truck drivers were gone too. And jobs were also scarce on the farm. Many farmers were unsure whether to plant or not because the Germans would take the food anyway. Everyone hoped the English would come and that the war end soon. But it was to last for five years.

The Germans came with their own vehicles and began building more barracks and putting up thick walls around them to protect them from the shrapnel of exploding bombs. The men driving the trucks were Dutch civilians. They were given green armbands to show that they were working for the German Wehrmacht. Their job was to deliver sand and gravel and other building materials to the work sites. If you worked for one of the contractors employed by the Germans, you made from 40 to 50 guilders a week, while you only made 12 working for a farmer.

A bricklayer in town approached me and said, "Why don't you come to work for me, Piet. I've got a truck you can use." Actually, it was a passenger car that had been converted into a truck. The roof had been cut off the back half and a box fastened onto it so it could carry a couple of sacks of cement and some sand and gravel. I agreed, and soon I was earning 40 to 50 guilders a week. After that we had it a lot better at home.

Near the end of 1940 a German column of trucks was sent to Belgium to help build an airfield not far from Brussels. I too signed on with the Germans and soon I was also wearing a green armband. Having one of those armbands was very convenient, because curfew was at 8 p.m. After that everyone was supposed to be off the streets, but not if you had one of those armbands.

At Brussels we worked on the expansion of an airfield. There had been talk that the place was constantly being bombed by the English, but not a single bomb was dropped during the three months I was stationed there. Every night German and Italian planes took off to cross the channel and bomb England. It was a horrible time for them.

My first encounter with the resistance

Next we worked in Creil, about thirty kilometers from Paris, also to enlarge an airfield. We were quartered in a school, but it had no toilets – at least not like those we were used to in Holland. There was just an open area with a beam that you had to lean against. Behind was a pit where the waste fell into. Pretty primitive! Thirty people could use the beam at the same time. But we ate from the German canteen and got the same food as the soldiers. We could also pick up coffee for our thermoses. So we fared pretty well. Our trucks were parked in a warehouse along the Seine River, which flowed through the town. A couple of Dutchmen worked there to maintain the trucks. I worked on the trucks for a while too, but for the rest I hauled sand and gravel.

It was here that I came into contact with the underground for the first time. Actually, a friend of mine made the first contact. The man he contacted was a wealthy farmer, who had been living in France since 1927, but he was a Dutchman from Goes. I think he had married a rich woman. We were invited to his place. But my first contact with the underground was not encouraging. He told us a story about something he had done around Christmas, 1940.

Communication lines for the German army had been hung in the wild apple and pear trees that grew along the roads there. People from the nearest villages were assigned to patrol the lines to prevent sabotage. A different person patrolled the line every two hours, so every section had a number of people assigned to it.

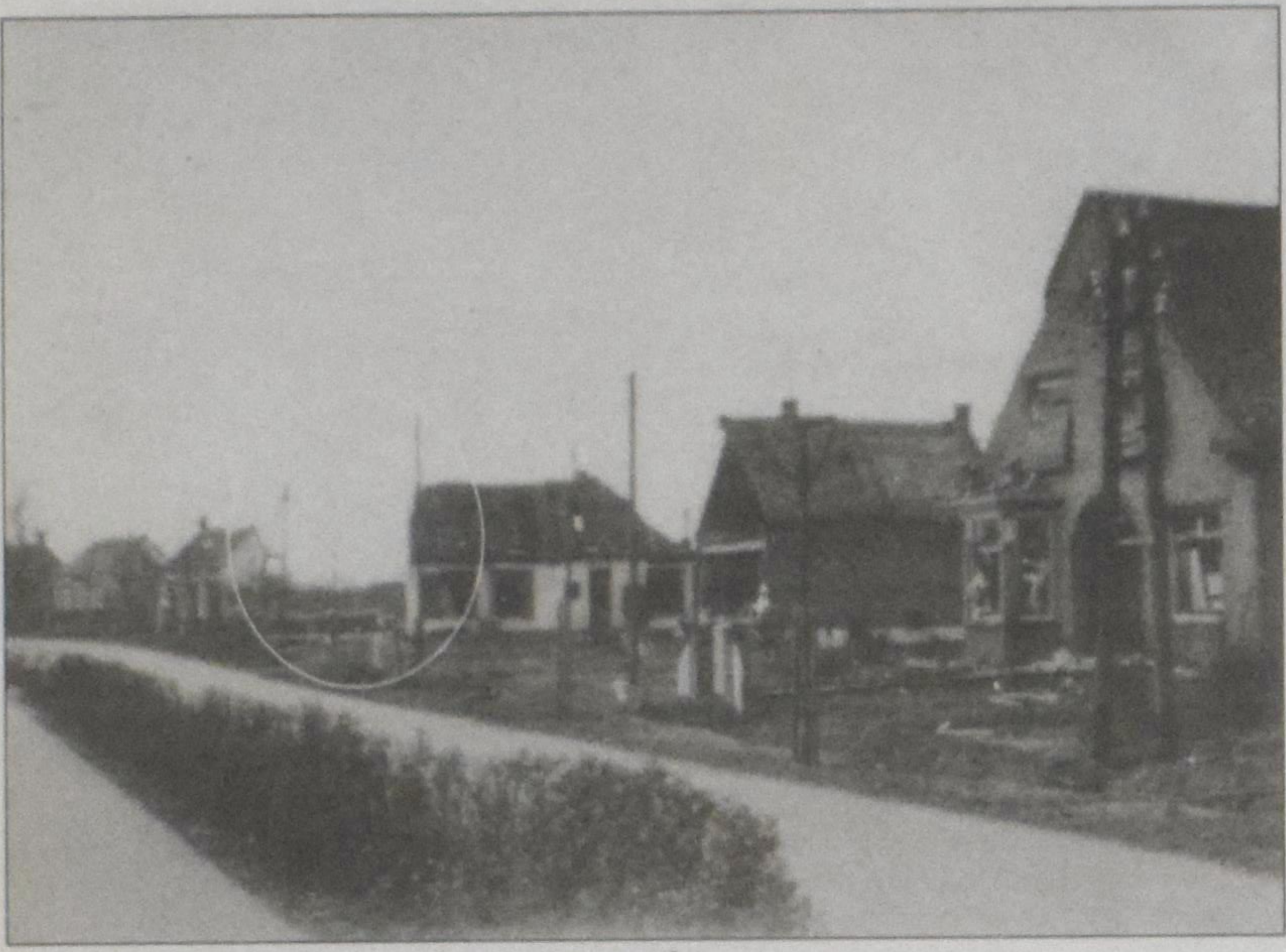
The farmer told us that he had talked two boys, 16 or 17 years old, into cutting the line. They did, and then this farmer told the Germans who it was that cut the lines. The boys were caught. They refused to tell the Germans who had ordered it, and they were both shot on Christmas 1940. So he had sacrificed the lives of the two boys to win the confidence of the Germans.

I thought, "I don't want to have anything to do with this!" and I never visited there again. I never regretted it either.

We worked in Creil until the following summer. Once we were given a week off, and about thirty of us piled into a big truck. We had a German officer with us, a Feldwebel, who was sweet on a woman in Haamstede. So we had no trouble crossing the borders, for as soon as the border guards saw a military vehicle, the barriers went up.

Afterward, we returned to France for another three months, and then we were ordered to Amersfoort. Those who wished

Schouwen Duiveland



The circle indicates where our house once stood.

to do so, could stay with the trucks, but this meant going to Germany with the convoy later. I think the Germans were preparing to invade Russia, which they did in 1941. One of my friends stayed with the convoy, and I never saw him again.

I turned in my truck and went back to Schouwen. Soon I had another job for the Germans, working in the kitchen. We prepared food for the German flyers and soldiers stationed at the airfield. The soldiers were there as part of the occupying force and to guard the planes. Twenty-four hours a day fighters and crews stood ready to take off and intercept English planes returning from bombing raids on Germany. The German fighters were hidden beneath wire netting with straw woven into it and painted green. From the air it was supposed to look like woods.

One evening in the fall as it was growing dark, we heard a plane approaching, but it was so low we couldn't see it. It was just skimming the treetops. "It's a Junker," said the Germans, "one of ours."

But it wasn't; it was an English plane. And although a couple of his engines weren't working, he passed right over the camouflaged planes and dropped his bombs. Before the Germans knew what had happened, he had disappeared over the dunes and was on his way back to England. Six of the German fighters were destroyed and several pilots were dead or wounded. I carried a couple of them to the Red Cross post, but no one was there. They had fled.

Retrieving bodies

Later more and more English, Canadian, and American planes began passing over. Some of the bombers were so badly damaged that the crews were forced to bail out, ditching the plane in the sea. The German fighters would take off and shoot holes in the parachutes so that the men fell to their deaths.

Once, one of the English planes was hit and landed in the sea. The crew managed to climb out onto a sandbank between Walcheren and Schouwen. My uncle was in the coast guard, and they launched a rescue boat to pick up the flyers, but the Germans started shooting at the boat and they had to return. They protested and argued, but it did no good. The Germans refused to let them go. When the tide came in, the English flyers drowned. It was too far from shore to swim. But even if they had made it to shore, the Germans would probably have killed them, so perhaps it didn't make any difference.

Bodies frequently washed ashore, and often you couldn't tell whether they were French, English or German because most of them had stripped down to swim for shore. Sometimes arms or legs were missing and it was no more than a torso, but they all had to be buried. They ended up in the grave of the Unknown Soldier.

It was part of my uncle's job to pick up the bodies every day, and I helped him. At first we were given coffins to take along. They were very plain, but they were coffins. Later the coffins were saved for Germans and the others were put in a cardboard box. But soon they didn't even get a cardboard box anymore.

One day in September of 1944, we picked up three bodies – one of a German officer, so we were given a coffin for him. But we pretended we were a bit loony and we put one of the other bodies in the coffin. He was a Lieutenant Hall from Hamilton according to his papers. When we arrived at the cemetery, the German guard saw that we had put the wrong body in the coffin, but we played dumb. The German searched his pockets – "To turn his personal things over to the Red Cross," he said, but they never did.

This picture was taken looking out of a German bunker in the sand dunes by Haamstede, fifty years after the war.

We had already searched him. He had been wearing good shoes: "Exactly the same size as my son, Huib," said my uncle, so we had already taken those. We said to the German, "Look how poor those Allied soldiers are: they fly without any shoes!" The German knew we were making fun of him, but there was nothing he could do, so he left.

We had also found some cigarettes in his pocket. These were for me. We had removed his ring and his identification and some money, several different kinds. Pilots carried foreign currencies in case they were shot down. And there were photographs taken on his wedding day. In one of them he was standing in front of a stucco house in Hamilton, I guess. That was the first time I had ever seen a stucco house. Later, after we had moved to Canada, I was to see a lot of stucco houses.

Once I was asked by someone from our town to pick up a relative who had died in the hospital in Noordgouwe. When I was picking up the body, the people at the hospital said, "There is also a body of a German soldier, who died several days ago. No one has come to claim it. Can you take him with you too?"

"Why don't you call his unit? They'll pick him up."

His unit had already moved, however; and the unit that had taken its place wanted nothing to do with the body. So I took the German along too, and I dropped him off at the first German post I came to.

Personal hardships

The year of 1942 was hard for our family. In April, my brother Adrian died from appendicitis. Jan and Johan had to go to Germany to work like all boys born in 1923 and 1924. Then, an English bomber, returning from Germany, released his bombs over Westenschouwen, probably while trying to escape German fighters, and our house was hit too. One bomb fell behind the house in the back yard, where we kept four goats. Only one survived, and he was leaping around on top of the rubble, but before long he was killed too. Sixteen homes had been destroyed, but only one man was killed.

Our whole house had caved in. There was one opening left, the bottom half of a window, through which I was able to escape. The stove had been knocked over and things were beginning to burn. When I got outside, there were two German soldiers standing on the road in front of the house. One of them had a flashlight. I took his flashlight, and I was able to get the rest of the children out through the window. The house was completely destroyed but we were all spared. We moved to another house near Haamstede, and we were safe again – until the next bombardment.

Joining the underground

It was at about this time that Mrs VanderWerf asked me to come over and meet with an Armenian who wanted to talk to me about joining the underground. Armenia had fallen to the Germans and many Armenian soldiers were taken as prisoners of war. Then they were given the choice of starving to death or collaborating with the Germans. Some were sent to the Netherlands to do guard duty, etc. to free more German soldiers for the front lines. Now I was meeting with an Armenian. It was the beginning of my involvement in the underground.

The Germans were building large numbers of bunkers in the dunes and planting mines along the coast, so they brought in hundreds of workers from the mainland. These were housed in a labor camp and needed huge quantities of food. One man was the buyer for the whole camp, so he received thousands of ration cards. Once a week he went to Westland to buy lettuce, cabbage and other vegetables and I went along to drive the truck.

We also picked up lard and butter in Rotterdam. I was paid ten guilders and a pound of butter. Sometimes I got some vegetables too. The buyer lived in Hillegersburg, where I would drop him off. Each time he would also take a few things for himself. His home looked like a produce market. He had everything you could imagine. He bartered food for other things.

While he stopped at home, I would go to my sister's in the Hague. She said, "You'd better find somewhere to park your truck. If the people notice that you're hauling vegetables, your truck will be empty in no time."

You could shout all you want, but hungry people don't listen. You couldn't stop them.

"Do you know where there is a garage?" I asked her.

*See **Memories** page 15*

Corinthians

The ten appearances of Jesus after the resurrection

...and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.....
I Corinthians 15:5-7

The supper at Emmaus *by Gerrit van Honthorst*

A.A. van Ruler

When we make a purview of the New testament, we arrive at a total of ten appearances by the risen Christ. Paul names five in this passage and then adds Christ's appearance to himself. I don't want to examine each appearance individually but only to pose the question: What do these appearances taken together mean for us?

The first thing that these appearances affirm is, to cite Calvin, the *natural character* of Christ's resurrection. The term "resurrection" is not an image, a metaphorical way of speaking. Christ did not arise from the dead in a spiritual sense of the word, whether in our memory, in our imagination, or in the hearts or message of the apostles. But he himself arose – and he arose from the dead. So he arose bodily, so that human eyes could see him.

He appeared, that is, he made himself visible to his followers. They saw something of the Word of life with their eyes and even touched him with their hands. He ate fish and honey. He showed them the wounds in his hands and his side.

His was, to be sure, a glorified body, for he passed through locked doors. One moment he was among them, the next, he was gone. He had to show himself deliberately. But on the other hand, his bodiliness was fully real. This is how he arose. And this is how he ascended into heaven. And this, too, is how he now sits at the right hand of God.

Our flesh is in heaven as a pledge, just as we have his Spirit on earth as a pledge. By him God rules all things. God's entire kingdom rule passes through the transformer of our earthly humanity. In this way he is the pledge for the glorification of humanity and of the whole earth.

But there's more to it. The ten appearances also point to the *historical character* of the resurrection. It happened once and for all. Once there were people who saw him. Some of them have died, Paul adds, because the eye witnesses to his resurrection belong to a particular generation. God acts historically.

His revelation consists of actions within history. They do not have the universality of laws of nature or of the human spirit and its structures. They are acts. Facts. Human reason hardly knows what to do with them. The things of God's special revelation – Palestine, the people of Israel, the cross, the empty tomb, the Bible, Christendom – are there intractably and stubbornly around us.

Everything vibrates according to God's choices. And it calls for human choice as well. It is not first of all human reason or understanding that are addressed, but the heart and the will. They are addressed by the question, Will you acknowledge him and praise him as the only, the true God or not? We must be converted from the universality of our own heathen existence to the particularity of revelation.

But the ten appearances do not only point to the natural and the historical character of the resurrection but also to its *revelatory character*. The words of our text must not be translated as: "they saw him" but as "he appeared to them". This means that he made himself visible to them. He stepped out of the reality on the other side of death into our reality on this side of death. It was his doing, his free and almighty deed. It was an act of grace. He made himself known. As plainly as possible.

To put it in other words, he stepped from eternal life into temporal life. Or better yet: he stepped with eternal life into this temporal life. He gave us the opportunity to see this, to behold and to touch it. The forty days between his resurrection and ascension are sometimes called the actual time of revelation. Indeed, this is revelation in its pure form, uncloaked and unmixed.

Lazarus, too, came out of the tomb and was seen, but he revealed nothing about eternal life. He came back from the dead to temporal life, but later he died again. Jesus arose from the dead but in a wholly different way: he passed through death to eternal life, and it is as such that he appeared to his own.

It is on this revelation in its pure form that all revelation of God in the world draws. Some of it was already present in Israel, in Abraham and in the temple. And the same is true of every sermon and every celebration of the sacraments. But then it is more veiled, more mixed. Nevertheless, we know something of the Christ, of eternal life, of God's saving presence in the flesh, of revelation.

Finally, the ten appearances also point us to the *electing and ordaining (to office) character* of the resurrection. He appeared to these particular people and not to others. Within that particular time period, within those forty days, he showed us eternal life; before that time and after that time it was never again shown in such an unveiled and unmixed way.

This is election. And all election is to service. The elect are there for the sake of others. This is also true here. From this election emerges the apostolate. Offices are ordained. This too is part of the appearances.

All the accounts of the resurrection – in John 20 and 21, Matthew 28 and the Acts 1 – are filled with ideas of office. The idea of office is implicit in the ten appearances as such. He appeared to "the twelve" and thereby turned them into apostles – eyewitnesses to the resurrection.

This still leaves lots of room. He also appeared to the women, to the two on the way to Emmaus, to the five hundred all together, to his brother James and above all to Paul. But this room cannot take away from the central core. The twelve (led by Peter) are the core around which the whole apostolic church crystallizes.

But we must know what we are doing when we jump into this circle. Every now and then someone (like Sadhu Sundar Singh) claims to have seen the risen Lord. We have to admit that this is possible, but we still need apostolic authority.

For us ordinary Christians this means first of all the apostolic experience. Then the apostolic proclamation. Out of this grows our fellowship with the apostles in the faith created by the Spirit as the root of the communion of saints. And the latter is the full communion of the children of men with the triune God (1 John 1). So it is a well ordered whole.

God established fixed points in history, in his kingdom. And all the well-being, assurance and happiness of faith depend on whether we acknowledge God's order with reverence and joy.

Memories ... continued form p. 13

"Sure, there's one just around the corner." The garage was empty, of course, because all vehicles had been taken by the Germans.

"Is it alright if I park my truck here?" I asked the owner. My truck was red, but the man knew I must be driving for the Germans, because my truck was loaded. "It's not for the Germans, but for a labor camp," I told him.

Well, that wasn't much better. "No, I don't have room," he said.

"I thought maybe you could use some cauliflower or a package of butter."

"You mean I get a package of butter if I let you park your truck here?"

"Sure, and some vegetables too."

He had the doors open in a minute and waved me in.

"You can park here for free," he said. "You can park here anytime you like."

"Alright," I said. "We make this trip every week during the winter."

"I'll make sure that I'm home, and as soon as I see your truck coming I'll open the garage doors."

So hauling vegetables had advantages.

At Zijpe, we had to cross by ferry. It didn't run very often in those days, but it was always waiting for us when we came. On the way out we would tell them we expected to be back about 10 a.m. the next day and the boat would be waiting. It wasn't according to their schedule, but that didn't matter: they knew we would give them some vegetables for waiting.

When a German truck arrived, they said, "Sorry, but we're not permitted to leave until tomorrow morning." But whenever we arrived, the ferry was ready to go. That buyer made a lot of friends with his vegetables. Later I found out that he was a collaborator, but he was a nice guy.

Once, the people working on the ferry wanted to know where to get wooden shoes because they liked wearing them on the boat. Everyone gave us their shoe sizes, and on a trip to Belgium, we picked up wooden shoes for everyone. We carried papers that forbade anyone, Germans or collaborators, to search our truck.

Although the Moerdijk Bridge was closed, we were allowed to cross. I had it pretty good working for that buyer.

But sometimes things went wrong. Once I got a flat near Zevenbergen. My boss had given me one thousand guilders for such emergencies, but there were no new tires to be had. I didn't have a jack with me, so I pried up some tiles from a bicycle path, drove up on the pile and then broke the middle tile so that the wheel hung free.

I rolled the wheel to a nearby bicycle repair shop. "Can you fix this flat?"

He took off the tire and checked the inner tube, and he said, "This tube is shot. I can't fix it anymore. I do have a used one, but I don't know if it is any good either. I'll let you have it for 1100 guilders."

That was a lot of money, but I had a couple of hundred guilders of my own with me and bought the tire. It had about ten patches on it already, and he had probably had it lying around for a couple of years. But what could you do? I needed it. The new tube didn't last very long, but it took me home.

Flood and famine

Most of the people had been evacuated from Schouwen-Duiveland. Even Zierikzee was almost uninhabited. Only about one hundred or one hundred and fifty people remained. Large parts of the island had been flooded by the Germans to keep the English from dropping paratroopers.

Haamstede and Burgh lay above sea level, so they were alright. But it was tricky to drive from place to place. Sometimes when it was windy, you couldn't see where the road went because the water was too rough. When the wind was from the west, the water around Zierikzee rose so high, you couldn't get around at all.

This also made it hard for the Germans to get around. The dikes and the railway were above water, but not everywhere. You had to know your way. If you ran into trouble, there was no one to help, because there was no traffic to speak of. Toward the end, I was the only one still driving about. Things became very difficult for those on the island; it was difficult to find food for us.

Of course, conditions were even worse in Holland. When we drove through, we saw columns of people walking along the road in the direction of Westland trying to find some vegetables. People were even eating tulip bulbs and they tasted terrible, but they were glad to get them.

Often by the time we reached Westland, the whole truck would be loaded with people we had picked up along the road. When we reached The Hague, there was a checkpoint manned by collaborators. They would shout, "Everybody off the truck!"

"Stay where you are!" Groenewegen would say, getting out of the truck. "You don't have to move." And then he would show them his papers.

"But these only apply to the truck," they would say. "These papers don't apply to the people that you're carrying."

"Look," he'd say, "the papers say you may not touch anything on the truck. These people are on the truck, aren't they?"

And they would let us drive on. The people on board were elated, of course, because often all the food they had found would be confiscated by these collaborators. Our truck was always loaded with people when we made our trips. Some of them stole food we had bought for the camp, but Groenewegen would say, "We can afford to lose a little."

You had to take the bad with the good.

Next: Working in the Resistance

Country Living
M. van der Galien

What do farmers do in winter with spare time on their hands?

Our church (Renfrew CRC) has Bible discussion small groups that meet once a month in people's homes. Last Sunday the topic was on work. We discussed the importance and necessity of hard work but also the need for down time, relaxation and family time. All the farmers admitted that sometimes their hobby or relaxing time was farm work. They also confessed that they truly enjoy this time to do different farm jobs – that this indeed was relaxing for them.

In discussion we concluded that leisure, relaxing, balanced activities and rest produced happier, healthier family ties that is pleasing to God.

There are many passages in the Bible about work. Hard work is honored by God (Genesis 31:38-42). Hard work brings rewards (Proverbs 12:14). Hard work helps supply basic needs (Proverbs 28:19).

But what does the Bible say about relaxing and hobbies? I couldn't find much.

There are approximately 120,000 family farms in Canada that will change ownership in the next 10 years. The main reasons are: retirement age of the farmer and no sons/daughters willing to take over, and government/industry laws and environmental changes forced on the farmer.

What will retired farm folks do when they move off the farm? Are they going to sit around the house with nothing to do? Will they travel some? What are their interests besides work?

What do farmers do in a winter when they have a lot of extra time on their hands? Do they have hobbies that keep them active? Do they watch television? Are they on the Internet?

I put that question to 60 farm folks – 30 men and 30 women.

Now you're probably wondering how did I manage to get all those farmers to answer a nosey question about their private life. No problem at all. I had 60 answers. They were probably as curious as I was about the results. I heard things that made me laugh and even blush.

First we'll look at the women because they have hobbies. Men don't. Six women said reading is their favorite winter hobby or pastime. Three women knit. Three scrap book. Two bead. Two skate and cross-country ski. Two said it gave them time to catch up on things. Two did visiting. Other individuals picked: walking, watching TV sports, doing crafts, making jewelry, being a hockey mom, re-furbishing antique stairs, sewing, and painting. One woman, with a hearty laugh and a twinkle in her eye said, she and her husband catch up on sex. Good for them!

Jenny Denhartog of the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario (CFFO) said her winter hobby is horseback riding. Jenny and her family raise 73,000 chickens every six weeks on their broiler farm in Arthur, Ont.

Kathryn Mayberry, the Ontario Co-ordinator of the Canada Foodgrains Bank, who farms with her husband at Ingersoll said she enjoys knitting during the winter months.

Now for the men. The work category is in first place with 11 farmers. Remember, we're still talking about a winter hobby or pastime. Four farmers catch up on work. Three tinker. Two do repairs and two like to do bushwork or cutting firewood.

There were nine farmers in what I refer to as "inside the house category". Three men said family time is important to them. Two watch TV. Two spend time on the Internet, (both dairy farmers). One reads. One sleeps. One has no hobby.

The outdoor recreation department has five farmers. Two play hockey. Two snowmobile. One does ice fishing.

In the "going out group" there are two farmers. One farmer enjoys going square dancing with his wife. A farmer, who is very involved in agricultural affairs, said he enjoys going to meetings.

Two of my farm neighbours (Bob and Murray) have the ultimate winter hobby. The two men have been busy every winter since 1991 building a ZenAir STOL Ch701 aircraft in Bob's spacious, modern workshop. The day I stopped by for a visit they were busy doing rivets. It's a slow job building an entire airplane from a set of plans Bob purchased from the plane's designer. They are content spending the winter afternoons building their aircraft rivet by rivet.

The two-seater airplane should be completed this winter.

In concluding this poll I've realized that whatever it is that farmers and their wives do with extra time on their hands, it keeps them close to their work and close to their families. They know what's important.

Maynard van der Galien farms in Renfrew, Ont. He wishes everyone a Blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year.

A plague of mice

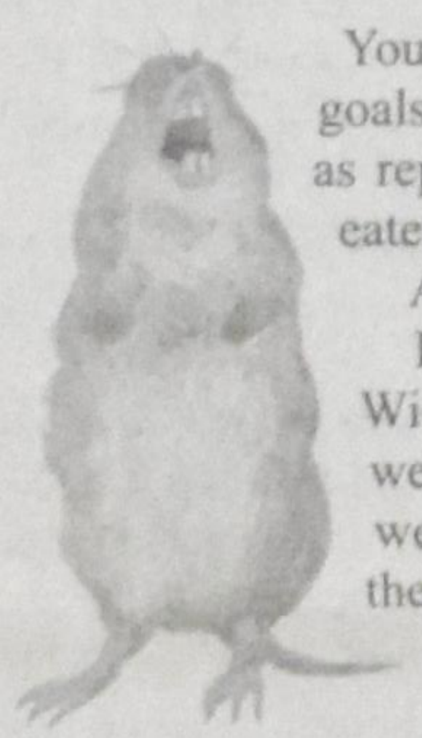
Flowers & Thistles

Curt Gesch

Last year it was squirrels. Squirrels everywhere. I thought them quite cute – "aww!"– until they began entering the garage, climbing between walls, getting through the flashing around the chimney, etc. So I helped a number – quite a large number – of them on their way to the Big Nuthouse in the sky. (A friend had them digging underneath the cedar shakes on her log house. More joined the nuthouse throng, I'm afraid.)

This year squirrel populations are way down in our area, having hit the population low of their cycle, which they would have done regardless of the actions of the Horrible Humans.

Now it's mice. Well, not only mice. All sorts of mouse-like critters. The little critters that look like mini-terrestrial-muskrats are actually voles. Farmers know about them. When they turn the swath, bale the hay, or pick up round bales, voles are suddenly visible, scurrying this way and that. Red-tailed hawks, ravens, crows, and kestrels feast on voles at haying time.



You'd suppose that an animal whose life goals include such mundane occupations as reproducing, eating grass, and being eaten would be a timid sort of creature.

Apparently not.

Long ago I was baling hay with Wiebe Keulen of Delta, B.C. While we stood on the wagon stacking bales, we'd watch voles scurry away from the windrow as the baler approached.

As one vole scurried away – too sad: the only place to hide was the next windrow, a temporary reprieve from homelessness – a crow landed near it and prepared to feast on raw vole-burger. The crow hopped forward; the vole stopped scurrying and stood up on its hind feet and bared it rodent fangs at the crow.

The crow hopped back; the vole scurried. This process repeated itself – Operation Barbarossa writ small – until another crow landed. The doom of the vole was sealed.

My friend Wiebe said, "Curt, aren't even these little creatures that God made amazing!"

They were; they are. But when we hopped off the wagon a little later for a rest and a drink, Wiebe picked up his shirt from the windrow of hay where we had stashed our thermoses, he discovered that his shirt had become a sieve. Vole food. It was probably the salt from perspiration that attracted the little shirt-ifore. Art (Wiebe's son) and I kidded Wiebe with mocking words: "Aren't even these little creatures that God made amazing!" Wiebe said something in Frisian that I didn't understand.

A vole attacked me this summer, too. I was "inspecting" my neighbour's work as he tied up some barley and peas for haylage. Lots of voles in that field, too, and no undergrowth, no weeds at all. So when a vole scampered away, I bravely approached it. No coward, that vole also stood up on hind feet and bared rodent-fangs at me. I pushed my work boot towards it; the vole retreated. Scurried.

I walked behind it and when I got quite close, the fangs appeared again. (Technically, rodents' teeth are incisors, but fangs makes for better drama.)

This went on quite a while until the vole finally found another windrow.

In houses hereabouts we are experiencing a plague of white-footed mice. Voles don't care for buildings, I guess.

One of my friends was gone for a week and when she returned there were so many mice in her trailer that she set her mousetraps, served coffee to her visiting mother, and . . . while they snacked, caught eight mice. Her cat was gone taking Jenny Craig for mouse-stuffed cats, apparently.

These creatures are also amazing but they apparently only heard of one commandment from God: the "be fruitful" one. A common conversation around here is this: "Do you have so many mice, too?" "Yeah, we hear them having races in the attic all night."

This rodent-boom will, of course, end with a population crash due to weather, disease, famine, or a combination of them. In the meanwhile, it is heaven for predators.

Like foxes.

My wife told me to look for a red fox that she saw in a field on the way to work. When I drove by that spot, I saw a fox "brush" waving in the air.

Then a jump and a pounce, front feet together and muzzle into the snow-covered grass. Almost simultaneously, a small missile launched itself.

The mouse the fox was after was – quite certainly – one of the kangaroo-mouse types[1]. It made a perfect parabola (this is no hyperbolae) out of the grass, into the air, and back into the grass. Meanwhile, the frustrated fox cocked his ears and used his sonar to find the little bouncer.

Cats are great predators. My cat, named Cat, is a trophy hunter, not a meat hunter. She brings her trophies home and lays them on the doorstep. She is not allowed outside during the day to save the birds, but is free to wreak havoc on mice and voles each night.

My dog (named Chester, not Dog, incidentally) also catches mice and voles. Mostly voles. When we take our walks through the barley field or down the lane, Chester (that's the dog's name) spends his time doing fox imitations: pouncing, digging, and gulping. He hasn't eaten much dog food lately, by the way.

Fortunately, none of the mice around here cause emerods, haemorrhoids, tumours [or bubonic plague] such as the Philistines encountered (I Samuel 5-6). There is such a thing as hanta virus, but I haven't encountered it in our area.

So we're left with just mice. Lots of mice. And lots of predators. All of which – mice and predators – are part of the same creation as I.

Wiebe was right: mice and voles are pretty amazing creatures, even if they do gnash their teeth at me, hold Olympic trials in my attic. . . or shred shirts.

(Footnotes)[1] ***Zapus hudsonius* (Zimmermann) - Meadow Jumping Mouse,** I think. "The Meadow Jumping Mouse ranges from Alaska, through most of Canada to the central and eastern United States. This species occupies most of the Montane Cordillera Ecozone. It prefers moist habitat from valley bottoms to alpine, including cultivated fields, riparian areas, wet meadows and moist grasslands. It is also found in early seral forests where vegetation is abundant." http://www.naturewatch.ca/eman/reports/publications/99_montane/mammals/mammals08.html

Curt Gesch is a neo-Luddite, neo-Calvinist, and – as far as he can tell – a neo-natal human being. His telephone number is (250) 846-9511.

Holland and the sea ...*continued from p. 12*

Beach and dike at Petten

require 20 feet added to their height given sea-level-rise scenarios out to 2100.

In some cases, that's not possible. The northern coastal town of Petten shows why. It's tucked hard against the back of a sea dike that traces its origins to the Middle Ages – and sits 14 feet below the level at which waves crash on the other side.

To build up a dike, you must expand its base, explains Roel Posthoorn, with the Dutch nature trust Natuurmonumenten, as he stands on the crest of the dike on a blustery fall afternoon. The presence of the village eliminates the chance to expand the dike's base inland. And churning North Sea currents already sweep away precious coastal sand from the seaward edge of the dike's base, preventing planners from trying to expand the dike seaward.

Possible solution: artificial reefs

Here, Mr. Posthoorn says, the long-term solutions may lie in building an offshore reef to reduce the height of the waves slamming into the dike. Or, as some are now beginning to suggest, perhaps the large deposits of sand offshore should also be used to build the country's coast westward by nearly a mile.

In the meantime, groups like Natuurmonumenten are working to meet two of the country's adaptation goals by trying to prevent further development behind sea dikes like this one and converting the land to nature reserves. These "climate buffers" are another tool in the Netherlands' kit for coping with global warming.

Adaptation experts generally agree that scientists, engineers, and policymakers already know what needs to be done to adapt to global warming. For the most part, they say, it means doing what they already know how to do to reduce risks from natural hazards – it's just doing more of it and a better job of it.

As if to underscore the point, Henk Wolfort, a researcher at Alterra, an institute at Waganingen University that focuses on sustainable development, shows a set of maps illustrating the evolution of watery areas and polders in the country since the 14th century.

"Our problems are not so very different from the problems the people in the Middle Ages had," he says. Even back then, techniques like building on mounds or widening the space between river dikes to accommodate flooding were well understood. The lesson? In a high-tech age, some of the effective adaptation approaches may come from a decidedly low-tech time.

"I think the people in the Netherlands have forgotten about those old ideas because they have relied on technological solutions," he says. "Now they see that technical solutions don't provide 100 percent safety. So perhaps we should think about the old solutions again."

Peter N. Spotts is a staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Awaiting the Second Coming

Lou DeVries

In the late 1950's a teacher at one of the Bible Colleges Henry H. Janzen wrote a seventy page booklet titled: *Jesu Rede uber die letzte Zeit.* (Jesus' discourse about the end time.)

One of the statements in the introduction is: "Often, when, at a meeting, I ask when was the last time you heard a sermon about the return of the Lord, I do not receive an answer." (Translation mine).

In Professor Anthony Hoekema's book, *The Bible and the future* published in 1979 is the paragraph: "Whatever the reasons may be, the loss of a lively, vital anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ is a sign of a most serious spiritual malady in the church."

Though there may be differences between us on various aspects of eschatology, all Christians should eagerly look forward to Christ's return, and should live in the light of that expectation every day anew."

Are we now, many years later, in a different situation?

If you were asked the question: "Did you hear a sermon about the return of the Lord lately?" Would you be able to say yes? If so, Praise the Lord!

In your case a cure is on its way for this "most serious spiritual malady."

The gospels, in several passages, refer to the Lord's return.

The Lord himself made many of those statements.

In their presentations and letters, the apostles also deal with the subject of the Lord's return.

We ought to ask ourselves the question: "Why was the Lord's return so important in the "emerging church" and why not now anymore?" Are we tired of waiting?

Indeed, it has been about two thousand years since the Lord said he would come back, a long time in anybody's book, but the Lord's. Peter in his second letter clearly explains that God's clock runs different from our clocks. (2 Peter 3: 8) Jesus said that he did not know when his return would be, only the Father knows. The coming of the Lord is sure; the timing will be "like a thief in the night."

The Lord comes back for a reason. Question and answer 52 of the Heidelberg catechism explain the reason for his return.

He is coming "to judge the living and the dead." The verdict is either acquittal or condemnation.

The catechism does not call it acquittal. It uses a word that includes the result of this acquittal; it calls it "comfort."

Elaborating on what this comfort is, it states: "That in all affliction and persecution I may await, with head held high, the very Judge from heaven who has already submitted himself to the judgment of God for me and has removed all the curse from me… he shall take me, together with all his elect, to himself into heavenly joy and glory."

Matthew 25: 34 is the biblical proof that the catechism is correct, it says: "Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

This is why the early church was looking forward to the Lord's return.

This kingdom is the one we have a foretaste of in this life.

This "kingdom prepared for us since the creation of the world" contains much more than this foretaste. In this kingdom, we will meet our Lord face to face and will be in his presence forever and ever. Our bodies also will be there. We will be a part of a new heaven and a new earth. What this kingdom exactly will be like the bible does not tell us, this whole change is beyond our imagination, but many things we experience here will not be there anymore.

The headlines in your newspaper and the newscasts on your TV are a good example of the many things that will not be there: murders, fires, accidents, global warming, earthquakes, sicknesses of all kinds, handicaps, homelessness, addictions and finally death itself do not exist anymore. Increasingly we realize that we do not and cannot permanently solve any of the wrongs in this world. There is no other solution than the return of the Lord.

Because sin has been done away with, the consequences of sin are not there anymore either.

The bible says in Revelation 21: 4 and 5, "`He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, `I am making everything new!'" Judgment, however, does not only mean acquittal; condemnation is the other side of the coin.

The catechism deals with condemnation in the same answer where it deals with acquittal, it says: "that he will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation". The evidence for this is in verse 41 of Matthew 25. "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'"

Shortly we will be celebrating Christmas. Are we ready to meet him as our judge?

Dare we to close our prayers with the words of Revelation 22:20

"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Rightly, we are concerned about those who have not yet accepted God's offer of salvation but if time does not run out now, some day it will and the words of the Lord will be fulfilled:

"Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to day Noah entered the ark."(Luke 17:26, 27).

Let us paraphrase the ending of this statement so it reads: "up to day the Lord returns."

For us also is the message the "two men dressed in white" conveyed to the apostles on the day of Jesus' ascension: "This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have him seen go into heaven."

Leila N. Morris wrote a hymn about the second coming of the Lord, the last verse reads:

Faithful and true would he find us
here if he should come today?
Watching in gladness and not in
fear, if he should come today?
Signs of his coming multiply; morning light breaks in eastern sky.
Watch, for the time is drawing
nigh; what if it were today?
Let us be: "Semper paratus!" (Always prepared.)

Getting Unstuck

Arlene Van Hove

If we would all play music together…

"I think I am in love…again," I say to 'he who must listen,' (not to be confused with a syndicated Canadian newspaper columnist who refers to her spouse as 'he who must not stray').

"Oh…?" he says casually glancing my way.

I pause and stare at him. I know the 'look' he is giving me, 'the distant small pupil glance' that betrays his lack of interest in what I saying, hence, my need to call him 'he who must listen.'

"Yes." I respond, not explaining but just waiting for him to come aboard.

"Again…?" he asks.

"Yes…again…you know,…first you…now him." I continue.

"Well…" he says, "Are you going to let me in on the secret?"

"It's not unheard of, you know…loving two people at the same time…just check out the Old Testament." I say.

"I don't think you are a fan of that part of the Bible," he reminds me.

"They did have interesting family structures in those days, don't you think?" I continue.

"You mean the polygamous slant, do you?" he asks.

"Well, you know, one to take out the garbage, and the other to…" I explain.

"Amuse you?" he says confidently.

"Well, yes…you could say that. I guess. He also plays a musical instrument, you know."

"That explains it!" he says, pleased with himself.

"I've known all along it was my guitar that really caught your eye all these years ago."

"You didn't seem to complain at the time, "I retort.

"I'm still not complaining…but at your age…now?"

"Well, you know how it is." I say.

"No, tell me, how is it?" he questions.

"You know I tried to appreciate classical music for a long time. But something always seems to be missing.

"So, you say," he grumbles.

"Now I know what was missing!"

"You'll let me in on the secret then?" he suggests.

"It's the beer!" I tell him.

"The beer?" he questions, confusingly.

"You know the summer column I wrote for the CC?" I explain.

"The one about the full jar …but there is always room for beer?" he asks.

"That's the one," I say, pleased he remembered.

"Andre mixes beer with classical music…that's the secret!" I say triumphantly.

"Andre?" he questions, mystified.

"Andre Rieu, a good Catholic boy from Holland" I answer stoutly.

"You are in… love… with Andre Rieu?" he sputters.

"Yes, I am and his violin!" I gleefully admit.

"But it's the beer that got me going," I insist.

"The beer got you going with Andre?" he can't help asking.

"The beer is a metaphor for FUN!" I say impatiently.

"People dance in the aisles, balloons drop from the ceiling, and Andre just smiles and plays his violin while he conducts his orchestra," I continue.

"I've never been to a classical music performance where the audience has a *relationship* with the conductor and the orchestra!" I explain.

"Oh?" he says.

"But it is who he is as a person that also intrigues me. His dream has always been to share his music with people all over the world. And now when Andre and his orchestra perform, he reminds us "if more people would make music together the world would be a much different place." I explain.

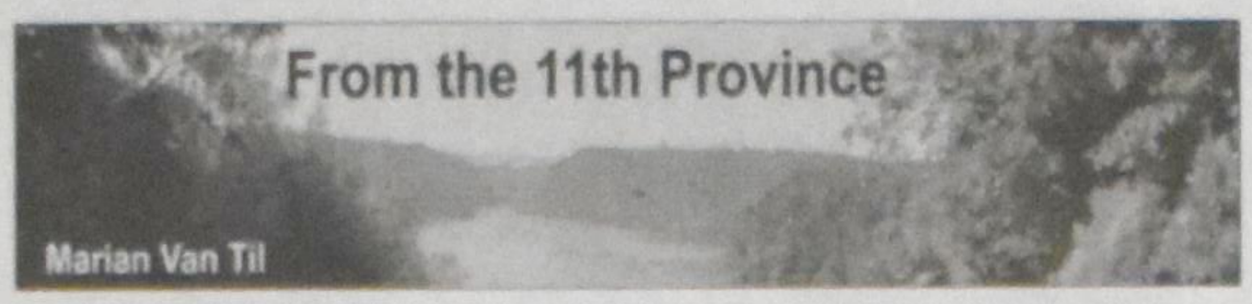
"Hopeful words, don't you think?" says 'he who must listen' and obviously does.

"Yes, hopeful and timely," I conclude.

On that musical note, I would like to wish all *CC* readers a blessed Christmas and New Year. And because this world is not without pain, sorrow and strive, may all those who are suffering, experience the comfort of God through the care of family and friends.

Arlene Van Hove is a therapist and a member of the Fleetwood CRC. She can be reached at avanhove@shaw.ca

Reflections



Meeting the Messiah at the Outlet Mall

It's the beginning of Advent. Again! Each year when the Advent and Christmas season comes around it seems to have returned more quickly than the year before. That feeling of the ever more fleet passage of time is not helped by the ever-earlier display of Christmas items and pre-Christmas sales in stores. And more and more home-owners get into the act with very early decorations.

When I wrote this column three days before American Thanksgiving (Thanksgiving is on the third Thursday of November every year), "Christmas" was in full swing at many stores in my area, but nowhere more than at the Prime Outlet mall in Niagara Falls, New York. The early Christmas season is confirmed by the thousands of Canadians a day who were, and are, coming over to "celebrate" it – or to celebrate *something* – with their potent dollars. ("Do you remember crossing the border?" my husband quipped to me last week when we were out doing a few errands and were surrounded by Ontario cars.)

I have doubts whether it is actually Christmas the shoppers I saw last weekend were preparing for. I myself went to that very outlet mall briefly, looking for some waterproof shoes. My stay wasn't brief enough! The promenades and stores were crowded. Most were so crowded that people jostled each other and their arm-loads of bags and boxes. I don't relish crowds. Especially crowds in which everyone but me seemed absolutely focused on shopping.

A pearl of great price?

Well, obviously they had that focus, you retort! That's what people do at malls. Of course they do. But what I mean is: all the shoppers around me (I watched for a while) were not just casually shopping (which for some people is apparently a form of recreational activity). These shoppers seemed driven, intent, riveted: collectively looking for a pearl of great price, I would have thought. Except, in that collection of intensely focused humanity each individual was doing her (mostly "her") own thing. Each person noticed virtually nothing besides whatever items she was zeroing in on at a given moment. And judging by the intensity, facial expressions and, in some cases, oblivious rudeness, few of these people were really having fun. If they were, they had a strange manner of showing it. They actually reminded me of gamblers I've seen on the few occasions I've ever been in a casino; the kind who sit at the slot machines for hours. Driven, intent, riveted on winning big while paying little, on getting a bargain. The most driven shoppers seemed to be the young – girls still in their teens and women perhaps in their early twenties.

I didn't find the shoes I needed but I wasn't much bothered by it. I'll get them in a less hectic time. (I'm immensely thankful that I'm not so poor that I have but one pair of shoes.) What did bother me was the focus of those shoppers. They rummaged through clothing and shoes as if their lives depended on it – on acquiring that stuff, getting those bargains. And not a few of them, having bought new stuff, took off the old and simply threw it away.

On the way out I saw outdoor waste bins brimming, and the sidewalks around them littered with boxes, wrapping and still good clothing, most of it showing little wear. (Clothing is thrown away and new stuff put on to get it through Canada Customs without duty being paid on it.) In fact, my local newspaper said a few days later that the mall is considering having employees sort through the thrown-away clothing so that the good stuff can be donated to the Salvation Army. These are not the Canadians *I* know. (I certainly assume they aren't!)

From another world

The scene was disconcerting. After a bit, being there so casually made me feel almost freakish, as if there were something wrong with me. *I* was the alien, as if I had just dropped in from another world and happened upon some sort of strange ritual in which I could not (and would not) take part.

I like to think that I *am* from "another world," and that all Christians are. I pray that we are. I don't mean that we should be "other worldly" in a manner that makes us "so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good," as someone has aptly put it. I mean it in the sense of not being "of the world." In that way we *are* aliens in whatever land we live in, and if we never feel like we are, something is likely wrong with our spiritual priorities. It was Jesus who instructed us to be *in* the world but not *of* it. And he, born of woman, God-made-flesh, was the most profoundly alien of us all when he walked our earth, the most deeply in this world but not of it.

Adding to my discomfit with that shopping scene was the obnoxious music blaring – blaring is the right word – from the stores I was in and near. I'm not sure what store-owners or marketers are thinking when they crank on that kind of music at that volume level, but it made me edgy rather than drawing me in. Being a musician, I am no doubt more aware of "background" music than some people are. Such music in our environment – in stores, restaurants, doctor's offices, nearly every public place – is very much foreground music to me. It affects me a great deal, mostly negatively, since it all seems to be too loud, have a pulsating beat that you can actually feel in the floor, cacophonous use of electronic instruments and lyrics of a type I'd rather not have to hear.

Fighting fire with Fire

I found myself thinking that we ought to fight fire with Fire, so to speak. I'd like to experiment: had those stores been piping in some good Christmas music – good in musical quality and good at setting out in its text the Gospel of Christ's birth and reason for coming – would those shoppers have at least slightly altered their intensely materialistic search, and possibly had their consciences pricked?

Oh, I know, shopping malls aren't great venues in which to play good music, perhaps particularly not good Christian music. Or so we've been told. In rethinking, though, I'm not entirely sure of that. I'm not talking about muzak or elevator music, or Christian Christmas carols submitted to pop or rock treatment. I'm talking about letting shoppers hear exquisitely performed choral renditions of our greatest, most Christian Christmas music. It should be *choral* because I think people should be allowed to – made to, in a way – hear the texts of this music, not just 101-string or electric keyboard versions. The Word of God is encapsulated in those carols, and the Word of God never returns to him void (as the King James Version puts it, Isa. 55:11).

What am I hearing?

Many non-churchgoing people, probably even a decent percentage of *young* non-churchgoers, recognize the tunes, but not the texts, to carols such as "O Come, All Ye Faithful," "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!" or "Joy to the World." But I say, give them the texts too, clearly audible texts. Give them a chance to get caught up short by the words:

Joy to the world! The Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare him room,
and heav'n and nature sing!
Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns....

(Isaac Watts based "Joy to the World! on Psalm 98.)

The second, third and fourth stanzas of this Watts carol, and of many carols, are even more explicit than first stanzas usually are about who Christ is and why he came. As a poetic whole, each carol tells the Story.

That would shake up a few shoppers! These days, it might even launch a lawsuit by an offended party. But then again, perhaps not. I'm not convinced that most people don't still want to hear the old carols, with their texts. (And by the way, why haven't we Christians been complaining, loudly, to managers and owners of the public places where we hear music that offends us? I'm not talking about disliking musical styles – though there are certainly some styles that annoy me no end; I'm talking

Reflections

about real offense, offense to the Gospel.)

Musical-spiritual revolution

As wonderful as the best Christmas carols are, and how ever much I think they should still be heard (and sung) in public, the music that first came to mind when I thought about this is the one great Christian work that has towered over all other music heard during Advent and Christmas, the most popular classical work of all time: Handel's *Messiah*.

That might cause an out-and-out revolution if played at the Prime Outlets throughout December. *Messiah* has been heard since Lent of 1742 and is still listened to by more people in more places on earth than any other classical work – though not generally in shopping malls, except for occasional jazzed up, truncated instrumental versions of the "Hallelujah" chorus. Handel wrote *Messiah* not for Advent/Christmas but for Lenten concerts held in *theatres*. It is appropriate any time, anywhere because, using Scripture texts directly from the King James Bible, it presents the whole cosmic Good News of salvation, from Old Testament prophecy to Christ's birth, suffering, death, resurrection, second coming and eternal reign.

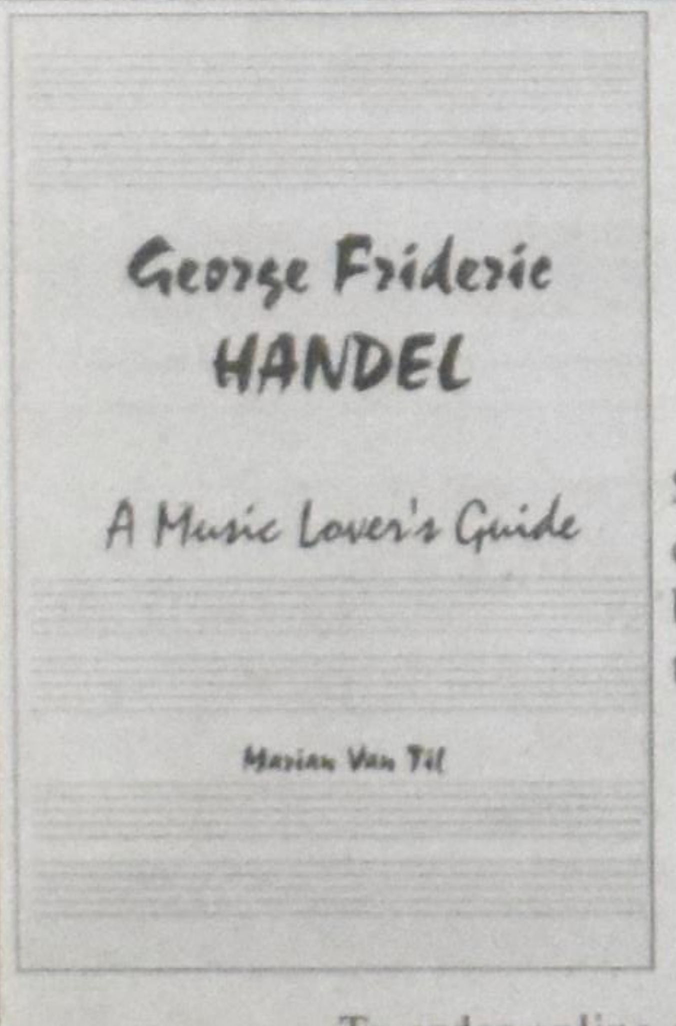
Charles Jennens, Handel's librettist, i.e., the man who prepared *Messiah's* text for Handel to set to music, was an evangelical Anglican and a brilliant amateur scholar and music lover who, like Handel, knew his Bible very well. Jennens chose the specific texts he chose for *Messiah* very pointedly, apparently in order to present the whole Gospel to upper and middle class listeners in his time who he believed needed to hear it. There is a written prologue that Jennens attached to *Messiah* which he intended to be an outline of its contents (and, of course, Handel concurred). That Prologue is 1 Timothy 3:16 (KJV): *And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.*

The Subject excels every other

As I write this I'm listening to a recording of *Messiah* for the first of what will likely be several times my husband and I will hear it during Advent-Christmas 2007. If there's anything that pulls you "out of the world" in the best sense of the phrase, and gets you to re-evaluate your priorities, its Handel's *Messiah*. That's what Jennens intended 266 years ago when he sent his "Scripture collection" to Handel, telling his friend Edward Holdsworth, "I hope he will lay out his whole Genius & Skill upon it, that the Composition may excell all his former Compositions, as the Subject excells every other subject. The Subject is Messiah."

If Jennens prayed that that would be so, his prayers were answered a hundredfold. They are still being answered. No other musical work has continually touched and changed people as *Messiah* has all these years. If Jennens knew that many in his own generation needed to be confronted in no uncertain terms by the world's Messiah, that is all the more true in our secular age when so few encounter him in church. So then: What if they were to meet him unexpectedly in a shopping mall...?

Marian Van Til worked for Christian Courier from 1984-2000, and preceded Harry der Nederlanden as its editor. She now lives in Youngstown, NY. She may be contacted by email at: mvantil@adelphia.net or via her website: www.wordpowerpublishing.com



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Namibia . . . *continued from page 3*

country's predominantly dry climate and paucity of surface water, which required economies of scale to produce sustainable farming. The policy of subdividing farms was "devastating" and under such a regime the new "farmers would never make it".

"Even as poorly paid farm workers, they have their basic needs met: they receive a regular salary, are allowed to have chickens, small stock and perhaps even cattle, and live in reasonably good housing. All of this disappears on a Namibian resettlement farm."

Coetzee, whose farmers' union officially supports land redistribution, attributed the policy of creating smaller farming plots to the influence of such institutions as the World Bank's one-size-fits-all approach, which meant that while a small plot in Ghana might be sustainable, this was not the case in Namibia.

He said the union was attempting to "convince the government to rethink and redesign their policies, as the global practice was seeing farms getting bigger and bigger because of the higher production costs".

New agrarian model required

The report recommends an overhaul of the agricultural sector, from the "apartheid era" agricultural colleges emphasizing cattle farming, to new farming methods such as "crop cultivation and tropical agriculture".

Tropical agriculture is usually labour-intensive subsistence farming and cash-crop production, using techniques like moveable cages that confine animals to feeding on weeds, the use of crop residues as litter in the cages, disposal of human waste in deep pits that are later planted with trees, and the use of ashes as fertiliser and in soap production.

The LAC cited numerous failures in the division and resettlement of commercial farms, from not granting land title and "leaving poor people in some kind of tenant relationship with the government [which] is not empowering them," to a lack of transparency, the absence of any support for resettled farmers and the overblown bureaucracy of "the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement – and the government generally".

"Given the small number of people involved, what the ministry and staff actually do is not apparent. For example, resettling 9,000 people in 12 years amounts to fewer than 800 a year, hardly more than 125-130 families. Yet it takes a staff of perhaps 1,000 government employees to do this work," the authors pointed out.

"Almost all of the 209 or so resettlement farms have staff of the ministry on their premises or in a nearby town, yet it is not obvious that these people are well trained and performing their duties."

Resettlement farms

The "poor record keeping" also meant that the exact number of people resettled on these farms was uncertain, and "many have already left the rural poverty of the resettlement farms, and more leave every day," the LAC said.

While white commercial farmers were heavily subsidised with both capital and large numbers of livestock by past German and South African colonial governments, "resettled farmers have neither, and are left to an impoverished lifestyle which is often as bad or worse than the one they had prior to joining the resettlement program."

The report identified an unpalatable conundrum: "Any 'average' resettlement process will move five 'disadvantaged' families to a farm at the same time that it removes six farm workers and their families to homelessness and poverty ... each resettlement process displaces as many as it resettles."

Commercial farms are one of the country's major employers, while farm workers and their dependents comprise an estimated 222,000 people, but many farm workers do not want to be resettled because of negative experiences suffered by others.

Even as poorly paid farm workers, they have their basic needs met: they receive a regular salary, are allowed to have chickens, small stock and perhaps even cattle, and live in reasonably good housing. All of this disappears on a Namibian resettlement farm.

The authors suggest the adoption of a land-reform model used in South Africa as alternative: farm workers are trained to perform management roles and provided with higher skills levels, with the intention that land title could gradually be handed over to farm workers or other poor people with the requisite skills to operate the farm.

Both South Africa and Namibia have trod delicately around the issue of expropriation, given the experiences of neighbouring Zimbabwe, and both countries place great emphasis on the rule of law.

The LAC report recommends an "increased pace of expropriation", but that pace "depends on public confidence that land reform is being successfully implemented at grassroots level, i.e., that small black-owned farms are being created successfully."

Autumn Glory

Sunlight through amber leaves
glows like stained-glass windows
in unspoken prayer.

Carolyn Flower

Classifieds

Classifieds

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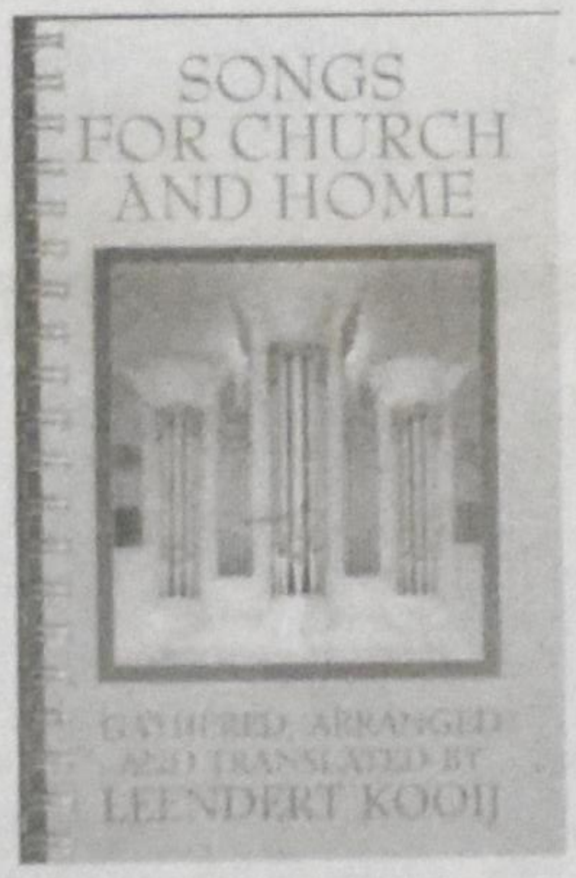

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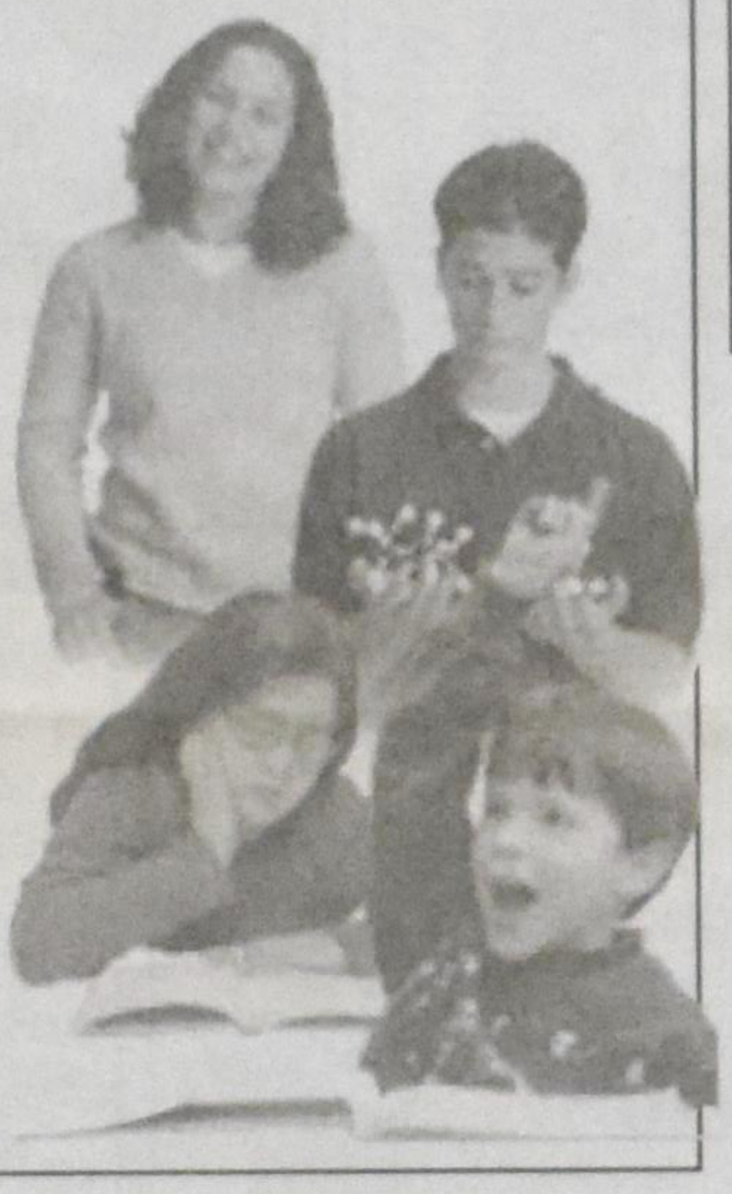

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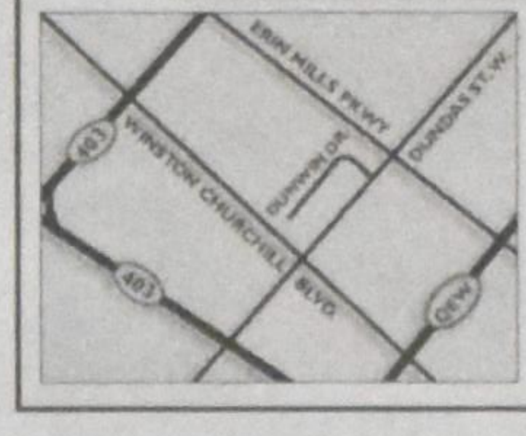

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Please note:
There will be a three week break over Christmas.

Below are the issue dates and deadlines for the next few issues.

Issues	Deadlines
Dec 17	*Dec 5*
Jan 7	*Dec 27*
Jan 21	*Jan 9*

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Events/Advertising

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Dec 7 Christmas Concert at Redeemer University College, **Ancaster**. Details in ad page 21.

Dec 21 Liberation choir 4th annual Christmas sing-a-long concert. 8 pm Redeemer University. See ad.

Dec 22 Liberation choir 4th annual Christmas sing-a-long concert. 8 pm Rehoboth CRC, Bowmanville. See ad

Jan 27/08 Maranatha CRC, **Cambridge** 50th anniversary. A special service to be held at 10 a.m. More events will be held in April.

Feb 15-17 Marriage encounter weekend in **Niagara Falls**, ON. For more information or to register on-line, go to **www.reformedme.org** or contact Chris & Cindy Otten at 519-393-5163 or by email at Ontario_Registration@reformedme.org.

April 19, 20 Maranatha CRC, **Cambridge** 50th anniversary. Celebrations and special events will be held on Saturday April 19 at 7 p.m. and Sunday April 20 during the 10 a.m. service.

May 2-4 Marriage encounter weekend in **London**, ON. For more information or to register on-line, go to **www.reformedme.org** or contact Chris & Cindy Otten at 519-393-5163 or by email at Ontario_Registration@reformedme.org.

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News

Rising food prices test Chinese consumers

China's more open market, economists say, makes food vulnerable to global prices.

Peter Ford

Beijing – Mrs. Wang stood by the shelves of cooking oil in one of Beijing's biggest supermarkets, inspecting the price stickers carefully.

A retired factory worker on a modest pension, Wang, who gave only one name, used to be able to buy her favorite brand of oil, a key ingredient in Chinese cuisine. "Today I buy whichever brand is cheap," she says. "We are feeling the pinch of rising food prices. We don't live as well as before."

Food prices, 17.6 percent higher than a year ago, have pushed China's consumer price index up faster than it has risen for a decade, official figures released this week showed.

And Wang's woes matter to more people than just her family. In a country where growing prosperity is the government's central promise to its people, the authorities cannot afford to let inflation get out of control for fear of social discontent.

Consumer prices were up 6.5 percent in October from the same time last year, China's national Statistics Bureau announced Tuesday.

The spike equaled August's rate, the highest it had been for 11 years. The Central Bank had hoped to cap inflation at 3 percent this year. The top inflationary culprits were food items, led by the staple meat here, pork, whose price has skyrocketed 54.9 percent over the past 12 months because of shortages. Poultry was up 38.3 percent, cooking oil up 34 percent, and vegetables up 29.9 percent.

Those figures took on special drama last weekend, when three shoppers at a supermarket in the central Chinese city of Chongqing were killed in the crush as customers fought for bottles of oil on special offer.

The limited-time 20 percent discount, celebrating the Carrefour supermarket's 10th anniversary, saved $1.53 a bottle.

That is no mean sum to millions of poor Chinese, however, as Prime Minister Wen Jiabao acknowledged Monday during a heavily publicized visit to a low-income neighborhood in Beijing that illustrated the extent of the government's concern with inflation.

"Prices have been on the rise these days, and I'm aware that even a one yuan ($0.013) increase will affect people's lives," Mr. Wen said. He urged employers to raise workers' wages and to respect minimum wage laws.

Inflation and unrest

Officials have not forgotten that one of the factors behind the Tiananmen Square student protests in 1989, which ended in a massacre, was high inflation. Nor can it have escaped their attention that sudden rises in the price of fuel have triggered unrest recently in Burma, Nepal, and Indonesia.

"Many of us wonder why this is happening and who is going to fix the problem," says Fang Xing, who owns a noodle shop in Shanghai's Luwan district. "In my opinion the government … is more concerned with making sure it does not look corrupt than with tackling the economic problems most of us face."

For the time being, though, most shoppers seem resigned to rising prices, and expect them to continue rising.

"Costs have gone up, but there is nothing we can do about it," says Guo Junquan, a driver in Beijing. "My family still eats meat, we just pay more for it."

Open economy, vulnerable food prices

Economists say that food prices are unlikely to come down any time soon.

"Given the cycles of agricultural production, prices will be quite high for some time, but I do not expect any great increase over the long term," Zhu Zhixin, vice director of the National Development and Reform Commission, said recently.

China can do little about one of the major drivers of prices at home – prices on the international markets. Though the country produces most of the food it consumes, "its agricultural markets have become more open since it joined the World Trade Organization, so the prices of many food items are influenced by international prices," explains Louis Kuijs, a World Bank economist.

At bottom, government policymakers say, they discern no fundamental problems and no serious imbalance between supply and demand in key economic sectors. They point out that though prices over the first nine months of 2007 are up 4.1 percent on the same period a year ago, 3.5 percent of this was accounted for by food items.

When foodstuffs and oil are stripped out of the October monthly inflation figures, "core inflation" was just 1.1 percent.

But officials say they are concerned about the speed of China's economic growth, expected to top 11 percent this year.

"We have to understand … the danger and possibility of a fast-growing economy becoming overheated and inflationary," said Mr. Zhu. "We need to adopt timely measures to address new problems."

China's central bank has raised interest rates five times this year, and is expected to do so again in the next few days, but the moves have so far had little impact.

In September, the government slapped a price-freeze on cooking oil and other staples, on airline tickets, and on electricity prices among other items.

Two weeks ago, however, it raised state-set fuel prices by 10 percent, responding to the increase in world oil prices. That move is likely to be reflected in November's inflation figures.

What's at issue:

- The Food and Agriculture Organization reports that food and feed commodity prices rose 37 percent in the past year.

Why it's happening:

- Higher petroleum prices have increased costs of production, processing, and transportation.
- Freight rates for bulk commodities are up 80 percent in the past year.
- Volatile exchange rates. The historically-low US dollar has increased demand for imports from the US, driving up prices both domestically and abroad. Also, as most commodities are traded in US dollars, the weaker dollar has pushed US export prices higher, especially for wheat.
- Drought in Australia and supply problems in other parts of the world.
- Higher feed prices have also driven up the price for livestock, particularly poultry, which is up at least 10 percent higher than the previous year.

Source: UN Food and Agriculture Organization www.fao.org

Peter Ford is a staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

News Digest

Breast-feeding & I.Q.

Got smart kids? They may have gotten it not from their father's brilliance but drawn it from their mother's breast. According to a recent study, breast-fed babies do better in the intelligence department.

Fatty acids uniquely present in breast milk were thought to be behind why children who are breastfed as babies do better in IQ tests than those not given breast milk. So being a fathead may not be an insult. The child does need to have a certain gene as well, another study suggest. But over 90 percent of children carry this gene.

The advantage is only 6 or 7 I.Q. point, however, a difference easily overcome by hard work. And, who knows, perhaps breast-fed babies are getting benefits that cannot easily be measured by science. Perhaps I.Q. can be affected by less tangible, less measurable factors.

Target audience

Maybe this doesn't count as news. But strolling through one of the largest malls in Hamilton recently, I noticed that 9 out of 10 stores catered to the young age bracket, from pre-teen, high school, college to yuppeedom. Yet, we keep reading about the increasing percentage that senior citizens and baby boomers make up in our ageing population. Have the marketers not been paying attention? Or do the younger generations simply spend much more? From the number of stores catering to youth, from clothing to music and video and electronic, it looks as if youth have oodles to spend.

Perhaps the fact that young adults are living with their parents longer without having to pay rent has something to do with it. In the fifties, many young people turned over part of their income to help with the family budget. No longer. Now, by the looks of the mall, that money tends to go to CDs, videos and clothes.

What's next?

Santas are everywhere present in the malls already. And they all strive for the fat and jolly look. Who wants a skinny Santa.

But fat Santas may soon be on the way out. The crusaders against obesity are becoming increasingly aggressive as more and more ailments are connected to the obesity epidemic. In the U.S. corporations are avoiding overweight employees because they are less productive, have more sick days and cost the company more money. It's only a matter of time before Santa is ordered to step onto the scale and put on a diet. The vegetarians may soon be clamoring for a green Santa.

I'm really surprised the animal rights people haven't gotten after him too. Rudolph and his companions must be driven near to exhaustion hauling that 300 pound Santa from rooftop to rooftop. The Dutch Sinter Klaas was a much slimmer fellow, but with his clerical mitre and his black servants he wouldn't pass muster in terms of multicultural appeal.